**John Brown.**

‘John Brown’ is less a poem and more a lyric, composed by the famous singer and lyricist, the Nobel Laureate Bob Dylan in response to the participation of thousands of US. soldiers in the Vietnam war in particular and several other wars in general. History stands witness to the fact that thousands of American soldiers had to fight and even today have to fight on foreign soil as part of the UN. Peace keeping force or as part of NATO intervention in several countries or simply as part of American intervention in other nations to fulfill American foreign policy of aggrandizement or even to overthrow a dictatorial regime. Though an anti-war poem, the present lyric doesn’t contain any description of the battle/war front, the suffering of the soldier, largely because Dylan was himself not a soldier and didn’t have a firsthand experience regarding war. However, the poem puts forth the war as a wasteful act that causes the loss of lives and limbs, plays havoc upon families where from young men participate in the wars and overall ‘the pity of war, the pity war distills’. The poem endeavors to shatter the myth of glory, heroism and patriotism (as also martyrdom though in this poem the character does not become a martyr) associated with war and shows the action as unnecessary and gory, full of horror and loss. Indirectly it questions the war mongers about the utility of war by showing its ultimate futility. Influenced by Modernism and the Beatnik movement the poem attains a universal significance since through the suffering of an individual soldier named John Brown it speaks of thousands of soldiers like him who suffer while fighting for their nations, many a time in foreign lands. (Modernism – A philosophical movement and cultural trends that aimed to depart from the traditional and religious and also was an outcome of the horrors of the First World War; it also rejected the Enlightenment thinking and Realism too)(Beatnik movement- A movement that introduced the Beat generation and believed in anti materialism and soul searching with covert promotion to pseudo intellectualism, drug use and a cartoonish description of real life people; musicians like Bob Dylan, Pink Floyd and The Beatles were influence by this movement).

The poem is written in typical folk ballad style consisting of twelve four line stanzas (quatrains) with the interpolation of a single line after the fourth, seventh and the tenth stanza to re- impose the idea of the last line of the respective stanzas and narrates the participation and suffering of a soldier in a war, a soldier whose name is John Brown. The title of the poem is appropriate since the entire poem deals with the character John Brown, his departure to the battle front, his being there and then coming back broken, both physically and mentally. The lyric was first published in 1962 and was never available in any of Dylan’s albums; however the lack of specific poetic metres doesn’t mar its poetic beauty, rather the use of proper vocal and intonational changes goes to establish its poetic cadence and musical charm.

The poem begins with one youth named John Brown who went off to the war to fight on a foreign shore. The going off to a foreign shore hints at the American policy of sending its soldiers to several foreign lands, here Vietnam to serve its political and hegemonic ambitions. His mother was proud of him as she saw him standing straight that is upright and tall in his uniform and all other associated accessories. Seeing her son in front of her she exhibited a grin that is a gesture of appreciation. For obvious reasons a man in army uniform is held by the general people in high esteem as this uniform represents prestige, national pride and heroism.

She commented that her son looked fine and she was glad that ‘….you’re a son of mine’. The clause ‘…. you’re a son of mine’ seems to signify that John was one of her few sons.

She exhibited her pride that he was holding a gun. She told him to do what his captain would say him and thus he would be able to gain ‘lots of medals’ and she would put them up on the wall when he would return. The advice of the mother to her son to listen to his superior signifies that she was perhaps less eager to see her son fighting for his country and more interested to see him being obedient to the captain so that many medals could be won. Therefore, more than the life of her son the medals were important to her. It seems that either the mother had become oblivious of the risk fraught in her son’s participation in the war, or she was deliberately trying to underscore the possible injury he might suffer from or martyrdom that he might face and just tried to put forth an over optimistic view of the war and its positive and medal filled outcome.

As the old train pulled out of the station or the siding John’s mother began to shout informing all in the neighbourhood that her son was there, going in the capacity of a soldier. She made it sure that everyone of her neighbourhood could hear and thus know about her uniformed son. Once more it was the exhibition of pride regarding her son’s position that was generally held in high esteem. Thus she was more than delighted and not less than proud about her son as she saw him off.

Once in a while she received a letter from her son and that made her break into a smile as she showed those letters to the people next door. She bragged about her son in uniform and with a gun and these other associated accessories which were part of ‘a good old fashioned war’. The term ‘good old fashioned war’ is repeated here in to show how much she was boastful about her son being a part of the old fashioned war with the exclamation ‘Oh’ attached to it to satire the mother’s bragging. In fact it is the poet who seems to repeat the term ‘good old fashioned war’ with the ‘Oh’ to ridicule the war that was nothing in fashion given the bloodbath and horror as also loss of lives the involvement in the war entails.

With the passage of time the letters stopped coming and for a long time they didn’t come, the period being about ten months. The ten months is just a period during which John might not have been able physically fit enough to write letters to his mother else he might have been there where from no epistolary communication was possible. But how did the mother spend these ten months without any information from or about her son is not mentioned herein. Perhaps she continued weaving pride filled imaginative stories about her son to satisfy herself and others in the neighbourhood. Then a letter did finally come and in it was written that her son was coming from the war and that she should go to meet him at the train. The information with the order or instruction was succinct and devoid of any emotion as it happens with news and messages from the army front.

This was however enough to make her smile and she went right down and looked around everywhere for her son. But she couldn’t see her son anywhere in sight and this must have had increased her tension till at last when all the people passed she saw him at last but she could hardly believe her eyes as she saw her. This implies that she must have seen the unexpected and hence the disbelief was there in her eyes.

Now comes the description of the son’s appearance. His face was all shot up that is mutilated/wounded by some shot or splinter attack and his hand was all blown off that is smashed by some explosion; besides, he wore a metal brace around his waist signifying that his waist was severely injured and the metal brace acted as a support to keep him somewhat straight and in a walking condition. His physical condition, injured and amputated with scars proved that he had gone through immense physical pain. The injury and the emotional shock was so much so that he whispered to his mother in a voice that seemed unknown to her and she couldn’t even recognize his face. It becomes obvious that the bullet and grenade injury or the splinter strike from some nearby shell had changed his face beyond recognition. It was fortunate for him that he was still alive. The poet repeats the line that mother couldn’t even recognize his face so changed it was because of the havoc the war had played upon him.

The mother expressed her genuine concern by asking him endearingly what ‘they’ that is the enemy had done to him that he had come to be in such a state. The mother, rather than considering the change as a result of her son’s participation in the war thinks it to be the cruel action of the enemy upon him. John tried his best to talk to her but his mouth could hardly move, most probably because of the surgery done upon his face compromising his ability to talk normally. His pathetic and helpless condition made his mother turn her face away as she couldn’t bear to seen her son in such a state.

However, he did express himself and his emotions as he asked his mother if she didn’t remember when he had gone off to the war front and she had thought it to be the best thing to do. He further said that he was there on the battleground and she was at home and hence not standing in his shoes. The tone is here one of sarcasm and condemnation as the son said that his mother had the notion that going to fight in the war was the best thing he could have done. But since she was away from the battlefront she was unaware what suffering and pain he had to go through. Back home she continued being proud of him and imagining about his feats in the battle ground; it was the effect of romanticizing and glorifying war from a distance that continues to build up a false idealization about war.

And then the son continued saying that when he reached the battlefront, he asked God why he was there. He realized that in the war front he was either trying to kill somebody or die trying to do so. The very uselessness of killing and getting killed in the battlefront seemed repulsive to him. The disillusionment of John is evinced herein as he says that the scariest thing was when his enemy came close to him, he observed that ‘his face looked just like mine’ that is he observed no difference between his face and his enemy’s. This realization is indeed highly ironic as two individuals with similar faces must be of the same fraternity and hence shouldn’t necessarily be enemies. The line ‘just like mine’ is repeated herein to express his sense of disillusionment and related frustration as he saw his enemy to be his look alike that is no less than his brother. It was also evident that it was war that had made them enemies though they had identical appearances.

It was then that ‘through the thunder rolling and stink’ that is through the sound of gun shots and cannon balls being fired and the stench created by the fired shots and the burned skin of the wounded or dead soldiers that he couldn’t stop thinking that he was just a puppet in a play. John’s realization is not singularly his but representative of thousands of such soldiers who are forced to fight to protect the boundary of their country or extend the same. The metaphor is apt as the war is compared to a puppet show and the soldiers fighting in the same are mere puppets who are made to act under the orders of their commanders. The feelinglessness of the soldiers who are like mere puppets is also evident herein as they act under orders with little or no liberty of their own to act otherwise. And when John was having this realization, it was through the roaring and smoke that the string finally broke that is his mental state of realization was shattered as a cannonball blew his eyes away. The cannonball was fired from the opposite side, obviously by the enemy and it came fast without giving John any chance for taking cover and ruthlessly destroyed his eyes. The eyes are considered to be one of the most precious of organs and their loss is simply irreparable and one is deprived of the power to see anything anymore, once they are lost and this is what happened with him.

Having said this he turned to walk while his mother stood there, still in shock to see the metal brace that helped him to stand. She must have been shocked to see the transformation her son had undergone through these months. He had been a handsome youth when she had bid him good bye and she had been boasting of him for all these months but now that he had come back shattered and shocked, both mentally and physically with the metal brace supporting him to stand was something she couldn’t accept. But then, as he turned to go he called his mother close to him as if to say something in private and as she obeyed him and came near to him he dropped his medals down into her hand. This goes on to prove that the soldier indeed had obtained various medals according to the wish of his mother but he had to pay a heavy price for achieving those and now that he had seen the horrific and gory side of war, himself being a victim of the same he realized that he no more needed those medals and hence dropped them in her hands. The dropping of the medals in such a passive manner goes on to evince his anti-war stance. The poet here questions, through the experience of John Brown, the utility of war and showing that there is no glory and heroism associated with it, disapproves tokens and accolades in the form of medals and titles rather speaks of peace and pacifism, albeit in an implicit manner. He also endeavours to de-romanticise and de-glorify war and show it in its real look and the mother as also John acts as his mouthpiece for the purpose.

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