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The Impacts of War among Social Groups in Suheir Hammad's "Break Clustered" and Yusef Komunyakaa's "Facing It"

The impacts of war are far-reaching and horrific. From physical violence to psychological grief and pain, certain repercussions are experienced only by some while others are shared by all. In their respective poems "Break Clustered" and "Facing It," Suheir Hammad and Yusef Komunyakaa offer differing commentaries on how the impacts of war fall along lines of age, gender, nationality and race. Using the same principal devices of tone, figurative language and ambiguity, Hammad highlights how war disproportionately affects certain groups of people, while Komunyakaa instead emphasizes how the mental and emotional scars of war transcend social boundaries.

The first device to become apparent in the two poems is tone. Hammad's tone is agitated and direct. The poem frequently addresses statements towards the audience, such as the rhetorical question "Whose son shall it be?" and her command to not "look for a shadow behind [her]" (Hammad, 2, 5). The poem thus becomes confrontational, almost accusatory, and discomforts the audience. This is supplemented by relentless pacing from short, repetitively structured sentences – particularly in the "One woman" sequence (10-13) – along with plain language filled with slang and overt wordplay, such as the word "ign'ant" and the rhyme

between “form and “storm” (7). These aspects make the poem immediate and blunt as it spotlights the plight of children, women and refugees: groups arguably most affected during war, but also the most forgotten. Komunyakaa’s tone, in contrast, is sombre and measured. Words like “fades” and “floats” make the poem more reserved and low-energy than Hammad’s, and give it a dream-like feel (1, 25). Like Hammad, Komunyakaa frequently manipulates the pacing of his poem, but he does so using the more subtle device of enjambment, such as in lines 6-9 (Komunyakaa). Komunyakaa’s language is also plain and straightforward, but because he mostly uses it to describe details of the situation around him, it serves to cloak his inner thoughts rather than reveal them, and makes the reader think carefully about how to understand what he is feeling. Thus while Hammad focuses her tone into a searing indictment of any who perpetrate, benefit from or fail to recognize the disproportionate effects of war, Komunyakaa shapes his tone into a contemplation of the emotional repercussions of those effects.

The second literary device is figurative language. Both poems make extensive use of symbolism and metaphors, but Hammad in particular uses them to give specific examples of the groups most profoundly affected by war. Much of her figurative language involves women, children and refugees, including references to women giving “birth to borders” (Hammad, 13), the harvest of “baby teeth” (17), and the fates of “refugee hearts” (14), and makes their experiences seem especially vivid. Her metaphors frequently refer to body parts like the face, teeth and spine (11, 4, 15), as well as combat imagery involving cluster bombs, landmines and smoke (16, 17-19). This places an emphasis on the physical violence of war, which is experienced by many, but not all. Komunyakaa’s figurative language, in contrast, is mostly used to describe the long-lasting mental effects of war. Besides a few fleeting references to smoke, a booby trap and a warplane (Komunyakaa 16, 18, 24), Komunyakaa’s analogies do not involve

imagery specific to combat, and instead make comparisons to more everyday imagery like mirrors, birds and the darkness of night (29, 7). They are used to describe grief, psychological pain and reflection: emotional experiences shared not just by victims on the ground but by anyone directly or indirectly affected by war, including veterans like Komunyakaa or loved ones left behind, such as the woman approaching the memorial at line 30. Komunyakaa does make distinctions of race, such as in differentiating his black face from that of the white vet (1, 25). However he does so using literal rather than figurative language, and so the differences are not as emphasized as they are in "Break Clustered". In this way Hammad uses figurative language to highlight the physical experiences specific to certain groups involved in war, while Komunyakaa uses it to describe psychological impacts experienced by all.

Finally, there is the use of ambiguity or a lack thereof. Throughout "Break Clustered", Hammad makes numerous assertions and absolute statements, such as her declarations that "language can't math [her]" and that "everything is everything" (Hammad, 9), and makes frequent use of words like "all", "none" and "never". Many of these statements mark out divisions and ultimatums, such as when she claims we must "mourn each one or we mean nothing at all" (15). In this way the poem clearly makes a separation between the groups of people who are disproportionately exploited in war and the groups who do the exploiting, and is uncompromising and unforgiving towards the latter. Komunyakaa, however, does the opposite by filling "Facing It" with contradictions and ambiguities, and adopting a more sympathetic attitude towards groups who have treated him poorly. Early on Komunyakaa depicts himself as struggling between being stoic or emotional – described as "stone" or "flesh" (Komunyakaa, 5) – and between turning towards or away from the memorial (8-12). This sets up the poem as being less unequivocal than "Break Clustered", and able to linger in uncertainties and in-betweens.

Later in the poem, Komunyakaa describes a white veteran standing beside him and looking through him into the memorial (25-27). As discussed in lecture, African Americans had been disproportionately represented among the dead in the Vietnam War, and the white vet's actions could be seen as failing to recognize Komunyakaa and his hardships in the war. Komunyakaa, however, recognizes that he is "a window" (27), and that the veteran is not actively ignoring him but absorbed in his own mourning. In this way Komunyakaa emphasizes that while there are differences between himself and others involved in the war, the grief they feel is the same.

Thus, although Hammad and Komunyakaa use the same three principal devices of tone, figurative language and ambiguity, they use them in different ways, with Hammad bringing to light the disproportionate impacts of war on a certain few, and Komunyakaa exploring the common experiences shared across these differences.

Word count: 1009

References

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