

CHAPTER - IV

CONCLUSION

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Elizabeth Bowen was a prolific and versatile writer, broadcaster and regular visitor to writing classes at American Universities. She believed that all writers have an inner climate or peculiar terrain. She had a preoccupation with the relationship existing between an individual and his environment. She extends the word landscape to include the whole social scene of her characters.

Bowen worked as an ARP warden and she used to patrol the city of London. This brought her into contact with people she would normally not have been intimate with. So the result of the war for Bowen was the breaking down of boundaries and barriers. "Life with the lid on" was over for good, once the war came. It was "Life with the lid off", that came to stay. It is not surprising therefore that Bowen wrote more stories in the concentrated period of wartime from 1939 to 1945 than at any other point in her career.

Bowen was exposed to mortuaries, the unaccounted dead under the rubble, and shoals of unknown people moving in the city. Though her stories deal with the personal and the particular, they represent the experiences of many people. She says "Through the particular, in wartime, I felt<sup>1</sup> the high voltage current of the general pass".

During the war, the first instinct of man is self-preservation. Everything else is cast aside. After the long war, the sudden peace is not easy to digest, because people's minds have been conditioned to disaster management. Therefore, Bowen's post war stories indicate a slow return to normalcy. The ingrained trends of habitual human behaviour once more begin to rear its ugly head. People start collecting themselves once again. The general indication shows people going back to the accepted norms of the society of the time and interacting with each other accordingly. Yet they can never be what they once were. There is a cauterization of feeling and the convergence of detachment. Both the war and the post-war stories of Bowen thus offer a unified panorama of the Bowen 'terrain' in war.

Bowen has spoken about the 'inner terrain' that every writer has in him or her. The present dissertation has sought to examine how the war stories of Bowen portray the disturbance and dislocation of this 'inner terrain' in the context of war. The war stories thus explore a variety of modes in which the 'inner terrain' is deeply affected by the universal tragedy of war, leading to a complex scenario of human, social relationships. The war-time short stories describe with hallucinatory clearness, a diminished life lived under conditions of violent abnormality. Ghosts, memories and imaginary terrains become more real than the real world. This goes to show why in Bowen's stories which are about wartime there is not a a single story which deals

with war action.

A striking feature of these stories, as we have seen, is the use of space Bowen makes. London in the blitz has always had an important place in historical chronicles. Elizabeth Bowen is perhaps one of the best of English writers to convey what life in blitzed London was like. Her perceptions range from realistic observations of daily life to the innermost recesses of the human soul, haunted by the fleeting joy or guilt, as the bombs fell over her beloved London. As the bombs explode, she reveals the long-forgotten depths beneath the surface of life. To put it in her own words, the stories give us "disjuncted snapshots".

It is in this context that 'Places' are of utmost importance in her war stories. They seem to be moral indices of her characters. Landscape, in the wider sense, is of prime importance in her work. Her vivid apprehension of the outside visible world is what makes her writing memorable. One invariably sees her characters before one hears them speak. They are so much a part of the landscape in which they have their being, that one cannot imagine, even for a moment, their existing in a different setting. Her source for the pictorial quality in her writing and her sensitivity to light is due to much of her life spent in Ireland, where light is an extremely important factor in the landscape.

War represents the fighting for threatened values. There was a heightened social life and there were visits to

the country as a refuge from the war. People had to encounter death of friends, relations and near ones. There was exhaustion, mental and physical, housekeeping difficulties and the recurrent blasting of houses or its environs (Bowen's own house in London was bombed). Stories such as 'Sunday Afternoon', 'Careless Talk', 'The Happy Autumn Fields' and 'Summer Night' capture the ethos of wartime England. War neurosis had to be dealt with for years after peace had come to England. Even reasonably sound personalities who had previously adapted satisfactorily to civilian and military life developed war neurosis. This was because they were exposed to some specially intense experience. This made their morale low. Basically normal people developed these patterns of symptoms. Bowen's war stories successfully reflect this complex ethos of the war.

The dessication, by war, of the day-to-day lives of people cannot be overstressed. The circumstances under which ordinary British people lived were unfavourable enough. Personal lives were shattered, communication stilted, understanding rare. This can be seen in stories like 'Summer Night', 'The Demon Lover' and 'Songs My Father Sang Me'.

Elizabeth Bowen said in 1945 by way of championing the cause of the short story as a literary form, that it was "the ideal prose medium for wartime creative writing". The present thesis has made a modest attempt to examine the implications of this statement in terms of a study of her

war stories. In retrospect, we can say that one major reason why Bowen found the short story ideal prose medium for her purposes as a war-stories writer, is that the compact verbal space of the short story as a literary form enabled her to see fragments of life. Given the fragmentations of reality which the trauma of war produced, the short story, with its orientation towards some fragment of life rather than its totality, was naturally the most suitable medium of expression for her. Some of Bowen's own comments vindicate this relationship between form and meaning the study has tried to explore. Bowen says:

"During the war I lived, both as a civilian and as a writer, with every pore open; I lived so many lives, and still more, lived among the packed repercussions of so many thousands of other lives, all under stress, that I see now it would have been impossible to have been writing only one book"<sup>2</sup>

The war stories of Elizabeth Bowen are thus imaginative embodiments of "the multiplicity of lives" she lived and saw. Considering the fact that very few of her contemporary British short story writers directly addressed themselves to the theme of war, Elizabeth Bowen's war stories constitute a substantial fictional achievement. As George Green rightly comments:

"In an age when some of our most brilliant literature constitutes, really, an attack by

man against himself, we value in a special way the art of Elizabeth Bowen. Such is the subtlety of her handling of the irreducible particulars with which the artist works, that some have not adequately distinguished among her various spokesmen. Her importance is very great indeed. She teaches us to find life in what casual onlookers might consider peripheral, if not bizarre. She teaches compassion toward the forlorn child, the self-destructive adult, and moral as well as social misfits of all ages".

## NOTES

1. Lee, Hermione, Ed. The Mulberry Tree, Writings of Elizabeth Bowen, Vinago Press Ltd., London, 1986, p.99.
2. Ibid., p.95.
3. Green, George, Elizabeth Bowen: Imagination and Therapy in Persepctive, Vo.14, No.1, Spring, 1965, pp.41-52.