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Varsha Adalja's *Atash*: A Cloud of Darkness

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From the earliest times in the human history to the 21st century, the world has waged wars under various pretexts. Wars have been fought for endorsement of ideologies, be it religious, political, social or economical. The journey of man's settlement from caves to concrete structures is besmeared with invasions big and small resulting into violence, bloodshed, terror and trauma raising unanswerable questions and reverting the very basis of culture and civilisation.

Varsha Adalja, a prolific Gujarati writer contributes to the vast body of war literature through her novel *Atash* (1976). She documents the man slaughter of the Vietnam War inflicted through innumerable modern weapons including nuclear, chemical and biological. Each page of the novel bears the stamp of hair raising incidents of dripping blood, burning flesh, dangling intestines, hanging organs, wombs torn open and women genitals targeted on the gunpoint to prove the shooting expertise and spirit of the soldiers.

The present paper attempts to examine the traumatic effects of the war on Vietnamese people as well as the Americans. The novel ends on an optimistic note of war having come to an end. But does war ever end? The scars and wounds inflicted on the body, mind and soul of mankind bleed forever.

Georg Friedrich Nicolai, a German physiologist in his 'The Biology of War' writes: 'actual wars have begun only after civilizations laid foundation of wealth accumulation'. (Preface, *Atash*, 1976: 7)

Probably Vietnam war also began with similar such reasons. Stories tell that Vietnam was won in 207 BC by a Chinese commander. In 938 AD, a Vietnamese commander defeated the Chinese army and established the great Viet. In 1858, French Naval troops arrived on the port of Turan and establish the military legion. By 1883, it had expanded its dominance over South and North Vietnam.

Due to the French defeat in the First World War, and the Russian Revolution, Vietnam gained new consciousness. Many freedom fighters came up together to free themselves from the French colonial rule resulting into the First Indo China War (1946 – 1954) America entered into the Vietnam affairs in 1960s making the Vietnamese government officials its puppets. It did not take very long for the natives to realize that their

French colonial master was replaced by new American master. The power shift was from post – colonial to Neo – colonial. Hence the second IndoChina War (1955-1975) is also known as Vietnam War in US, Resistant War against America in Vietnam. It was officially fought between North Vietnam and the government of South Vietnam. The North Vietnam army was supported by the Soviet Union, China and other communist allies and the South Vietnam army was supported by the US, Philippines and other anti – communist allies. (1)

The VietCong, also known as National Liberation Front NLF and North Vietnam Army NVA were fighting to reunify Vietnam. They viewed the conflict as a colonial war and a continuation of the First Indochina War against forces from France and later on the US. The US government viewed its involvement in the war as a way to prevent a communist takeover of South Vietnam. This was a part of a wider containment policy, with the stated aim of stopping the spread of communism.(2)

The war exacted a huge human cost in terms of fatalities. Estimates of the number of Vietnamese soldiers and civilians killed vary from 8,00,000 to 3.1 million. Some 2,00,000 to 3,00,000 Cambodians, 20,000 to 2,00,000 Laotians and 58,220 US service members and many others went missing.

In the preface to the novel, Adalja mentions the general estimation of the warfare expense. She notes: ---the warfare activities impose 16 million dollar expense per hour ---- the value of a single missile of this destruction capacity is equal to four universities. ---One lakh tractors can be bought from its one 'ground to air missile'.(10)

Talking about the nuclear power possessed by super power nations she writes: with the amount of nuclear energy the super power nations have, the whole of mankind can be demolished 50,000 times.(10) She further mentions the findings of the report of the director

of the Mercy College Research and Study Centre for Children, the report says: “70% of war victims are children. Is it less dangerous for the future of Vietnam?”(12)

America had to face opposition against its own policy in the form of anti – Vietnam War agitation and movement leading to its withdrawal from war in 1973, resulting into the end of war in 1975 with the capture of Saigon by North Vietnam Army. The following year North and South Vietnam were reunited. In the novel this incident is marked by the murder of Ziem and his brother Archbishop in a fort like church in Saigon by the Viet Cong activists. The Viet Cong activist Van Thi had sworn to kill these two for having killed their great Buddhist Guru and thousands of innocent people who had gathered at the Loi Temple on the birth anniversary of Lord Buddha.

The strange irony of the world remains that mankind has been more divided rather than united in the name of religion. It has ever been the target tool of the colonizers to either convince or making religion a complex phenomenon which can be resolved only if religion goes global just like everything else. Adalja cites what Satre stated at the second meeting of the International War Crime Tribunal held at Copenhagen in the year 1967.

“The Americans are killing the Vietnamese only because they are Vietnamese, in the same way as the Nazis killed Jews only because they were Jews.” (Preface:14)

The novelist is a master dramatist in compactly knitting the nineteen chapters of the novel in such a way that curtains are drawn one after the other from the lives of the various characters like Richard, John, the American soldiers, Ziem, the Prime Minister Archbishop the brother of Ziem, Van Thi, Fi Cong, Ta Thi Kiyu, Le Van, Ya Lon, the Viet Cong activists, Nhu, the wife of archbishop, Suan the sister of Fi Cong, Shirley, the nurse Dr. Lucier and the reporter Mr. Dale Vitner and photographer Heiberley. Each character has faced the internal and external conflicts of war and felt its pangs churning their very self from its core. On the surface it seems that each one be it American or Vietnamese has a cause to fight but their internal turmoil reveals that they are in utter dilemma regarding the very basis of their belief in war. When the novel begins two American soldiers Richard and John are shown going to a nightclub. Richard exposes the bitter truths of war to John and tells him to get used to it at the earliest. John is disgusted to see the American soldiers hooting at the Vietnamese teenager

girls in the nightclub. John loaths to hear what Richard had to say: *Veshya to Yuddhani paheli pedash chhe* (Prostitute is the first product of war) (*Atash*, 3)

Richard's wife had joined an anti – Vietnam War movement and married someone while he is away from his homeland. Through this information the novelist prepares the platform for the journalist and public opinion to play its significant role in questioning the involvement of America. A reporter named Dale Vitner and Heibrelay the photographer from 'Life' magazine arrive just when John was expressing his angst to Richard thus: "Don't you feel this to be a strange thing? In the skyscraper culture, even if you kill a thief or a scoundrel, it is considered to be a murder. Law punishes you and people condemn you and in war you butcher innocent people even then the government rewards you with honour and title. How absurd is it? (38) *Tan eek vat vichitra nathi lagti, Richard? Skyscraperni sanskrutima tane koy gundo ke chor mansno pan jaan lo to e khun kehway. Kaydo saja kare, samaj filkar ape ane yuddhama tame nirdosh lokone rehnsi nacho to ej sarkar tamne maan-chand-khitab ape. Ketli behudi vat?*(38)

The reporter Dale represents the actual war reporter Mr. Michael Mok and the photographer Paul Sahutzer is Heiberley in the novel. Dale tells John and Richard their experience at the Vietnamese refugee camp, military training camp and the brothel for American soldiers. Now they wanted to see the 'real action' from the frontline. They are allowed to go along with the soldiers on mission to strike Mylai. When the bombarding began, the soldiers including John realized that there were no VietCong sor arms and ammunition. The village had only aged people, women, children and disabled people. Yet the soldiers were forced to destroy everything including farms, fields and cattle. John had to gather lot of courage to shoot the old woman crying for mercy. He shot the half alive child because he did not want the hounds and wolves to eat the child. These and many such incidents push John into a state of neurosis. Varsha Adalja rightly remarks: *Jagta hasyna Ghana prakar chhe. Ane tena artho pan bhin bhin hoy shake. Pan samagra vishvama vedanabharya rudanni ek bhasha chhe. Vedanane dharma jati, basa na koy bhed nathi.*(45)

"They are many types of laughter in the world, and they may have different meanings. But the pain fraught cry has only one language in the whole world. The grief has no differences of religion, caste and language." (45)

The brutal man slaughter at Mylai was worst then any in the history of violence and war. It out did the Nazis' concentration camp and the Jallianwala Baugh massacre. The only vivid picture that emerged was of 'The green grass bathing in the red blood'. (46) The novelist duly puts the following words in the mouth of the reporter inviting appreciation from the readers when William Kelly takes away the film from him. *Joke mein to army camerani film api chhe. Mari pase maro khangi camera chhe. Hu khabarpatri chhu. Koy deshnu ramkdu nathi. Mara deshnu pan nahi.*(48)

“In fact I have given the film of army camera I have my personal camera. I am a journalist. Not a toy of any nation. Not my nation even.”(48)

The world would surely condemn the Vietnam War but not forget the courage of the journalists and America's freedom of press.

The dark side of the war is filthy and loathsome but it also is the genesis of goodness in man, in the form of Doctor Lucier, Suan, Faan Thi, the father of Fi Cong, Shirley the nurse at American hospital. Had it not been for Dr. Lucier and Suan, John would not have survived from the bamboo traphole of the guerillas. When Fi Cong comes to take John, the father refuses to hand him over to the son, though John is an American soldier and hence an enemy of the Vietnamese. The old man briefly narrates his story as a young activist during the fight against the French but also mentions that he too was saved by a French doctor. Just as bombs don't distinguish the foes and friends in the same way saviours carry out their duties without any discrimination. Faith in humanism is revived to know that Vietamese soldier is saved by a French doctor and an American soldier is saved by a Vietnamese old man, who swiftly stood between the bullets shot by his son John. The old man's last words reveal the utmost truth of war; 'you cannot destroy a thought by killing a person.'

.....*Ke vayktino nash karvathi vicharno nash nathi thato.*(111)

A large war ship arrives on the pacific ocean with colonel Win Foster in charge to carry out the last bombarding mission in which 43,500 pounds of bombs were to be hurled on different parts of North Vietnam in a stipulated time of one and half minute. John who was just saved and treated by Suan and Dr Lucier falls a victim of this bombarding and is extremely wounded with burning and tearing pain in his body. More than his body, it is his mind and

soul that are injured for he could not save those who had saved his life at the risk of their own. When he regains consciousness in the hospital after 22 days, he is haunted by the scenes of death and destruction. When sister Shirley tries to console him by saying, ‘you don’t worry, you are amongst your own brothers, he starts thinking---

“-----means nothing to worry? ha.....ha John laughed.....thousands of soldiers have died, wandered like cattle, caught disease and bombs are still thrown and I musn’t worry ? Ha...ha.... He tried to bring himself out from the dungeon of darkness.”
(149-150)

Charles a fatally wounded American soldier fanatically appeals to his fellow soldiers in the following words. His voice rang:

“Friends if there is any particle of humanism left in you, raise your voice against this man slaughter....life of human being is pious... it is God’s gift. It is Sin to Snatch it away.”(152)

“War torn soul of Charles is shown shivering between his urge to live when he cries to sister, ‘I want to live. I don’t want to die. (152) and yet unable to bear the pain implores the doctor to kill him saying, Doctor....life is a hell....like a hell....how shall I live...? Tank blasted doctor I was.... Doctor not a single limb is ok. Medicine....x ray....plastic surgery....wooden hands and legs....no doctor no....kill me now itself.”(153)

Charles’ call to raise their voice against war is carried forward by his friends who were witness to the Mylai Mission. They draft a report to give it to the ‘Life’ magazine reporter to make it public. With the support of sister Shirley the journalists get an opportunity to listen to the real stories of the soldiers each under the tremendous guilt. They were fighting hard to reconcile with their loss but only time can say how successful they would be, for some had lost their limbs, some their relations and loved ones. Above all the irreparable loss was the loss of their conscience.

John is given discharge from the hospital with a piece of information that because of the treatment given to him to recover the damage done to his nervous system due to poisonous gases of the nuclear bomb, he had now become impotent. He had hardly recovered from the

neurosis of violence on innocent Vietnamese women and children when he had to face the traumatic truth of his life --- his inability to love his wife and fulfill her dream of becoming a mother. He feels as though 'orange flame has engulfed the dark black body'(195) He shouts, 'sister have mercy on me. Give me back my manlihood. Or else kill me'. (195-96) only after much efforts of sister Shirley John is convinced to carry on the legacy of service above self laid by Faan Thi, Suaan and Dr Lucier.

In the Viet Cong regime, Van Thi seems to be pondering over the loss and gain of the war. He is worried about the inefficiency of the newly appointed officials to rule Saigon after the revolt. Saigon was once again caught in the storm of anarchy, disorder and dissatisfaction.

What Sara Suleri had to say for India in *The Rhetoric of English India* is applicable to all the erstwhile colonies. She writes: To tell the history of another is to be pressed against the limits of one's own-thus culture learns that terror has a local habitation and a name....(109)

Van Thi's wounded psyche reflects over the outcome of the war.

"I haven't become weak mentally. But people are grinded between the two sides of war. Is not the future of a nation dark, whose thousands of children have died in war, innumerable children are wandering as orphans and lakhs of them live with their lungs filled with poisonous gas?"(143)

Adalja's *Atash* is a story of an American soldier in the backdrop of Vietnam War. It is also the story of American war Journalists. Where are the stories of Van Thi, Fi Cong, Ta

Thi, Suan, Le Van and Ho? In 2015 the 'Life' magazine brought out a special issue to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War, to recapitulate the photo essay of their war journalist Michael Mok and Pal Schutzer. While the war was on, the colonizers enriched their economy by selling and supplying the weapons and warfare products to the colonized country. Years after the war being over, they mint money from the product they prepared from the war. The story is giving a humanitarian touch to the dark side of the war, creating marvellous impression of its history and culture.

In the end of the novel, John stares outside the small window of the aero plane. It was too dark outside. Yet some light spread forth from the corners of the horizon. The sun was to

arise with a speck of brightness. Atash occurs in midst of clouds of darkness, between John's arrival and departure, leaving Vietnamese to give out a shrill cry:

Whoever is listening be my witness !

I cannot accept this war.\

I never could, I never shall,\

I have to say this a thousand times.

Before I am killed.

I felt I am like that bird\

which dies for the sake of its mates.

Dripping blood from its broken beak, and crying out

Beware ! Turn around to face

Your real enemies----

Ambition, Violence, hatred, greed.

Men cannot be our enemies---

If we kill men, what brothers will we have left ?

With whom shall we live then? (85)

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All citations from the novel are given in parenthesis.