

## Introduction

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Streets decorated with sprays of rubble  
that once were houses.  
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the whole tensed, ready.  
In the shadows young fresh faces  
clutch machine guns to themselves  
like Teddy Bears.

-M Chambers

When I first mentioned my intention to compile an anthology of poems on the Ukraine war, heads turned and question marks appeared on faces. The air became heavy with curiosity. One Russian poet had a bone to pick with me, claiming that it would provoke emotions and tears: "How naïve can you be to even think of a collection of poems at such volatile times?" he admonished me. I almost thought he was right had it not been an email I received from an American poet who stood at the opposite end and listed various functions of a writer during times of war: "A Poet cannot just sit quietly as war ravages humanity around him" he goaded me. Then, came an email from a long-time Russian friend. She expressed fear for any Russian poet who condemned the war in Ukraine, and by extension being accused of undermining their own country. One poet from I don't know where, emailed me, spewing lots of venom, and asked where I stood in "this": was I supporting Ukraine or Russia? Anger and hatred had risen to the top of her throat. It was such an irrelevant question to demand of a poet, more so of an editor. As though we are in this world to kill or not to kill, and are required to strictly stand on one side or the other.

This debate that characterized the onset of this anthology led me to ask numerous questions of myself: Should poets support war? Should they savor the killing of innocent men, children and women? Should they celebrate the displacement of women and children and the burying of young people who are killed before they can fulfill their vocation and embellish the world with what is unique to them?

This avalanche of questions led me further on to a portmanteau question: What is the role of artists in society? What is their function during a time of war? Can they really afford to just watch as people die around them? Can they restrain themselves from writing anything simply because these are volatile times? Can they afford to hold back because others feel they will elicit emotions? Can they hesitate to write war poetry because country, friends and enemies will construe them to have taken a political side?

If poets can behave in such a manner as to hold themselves back from their surroundings, then, without doubt, their poetry will not have a soul. It will just be an arrangement of words on a page, and who will be interested in such compositions that have no soul?

Nilavronill Shoovro in *Our Poetry Archive* blogspot warns:

Do you think keeping yourself insulated from the present world would bring that soul into your writing? I am afraid, that is not possible at all. Keeping ourselves insulated from the human sufferings, from the tragedies of political events; even if we try to be creative in literary field, all our creativity will be lifeless without any true soul within. Nobody would recall our poetical brilliance for a second time after going through that sort of caricature of poetry devoid of true soul.

Artists cannot write in a vacuum. We are members of our society and have no escape from the politics and social issues of that community. These are our raw materials, the ingredients for our creative works, and it is up to us, being endowed with imaginative gift, to assemble them into an aesthetic product:

The product of a writer's imaginative involvement – what Shakespeare called *mirror unto nature* – becomes a reflection of society: its economic structure, its class formation, its conflicts and contradictions; its class power political and cultural struggles; its structure of values ... (Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, 1981, 72).

In regard to our current situation, if a poet remains neutral and does not express his/her emotions or feelings towards the Ukraine war, what can we then say about such a poet? I am sure he or she risks being viewed as supporting the war and the killing of innocent people. He or she, then is a murderer and has a smear of blood on his or her fingers. A poet is a creative writer, "creative" here means not only putting words together during the composition process but also creating humanity, of course not as God does, for a poet cannot be God, and it is blasphemy to even think so, but "creates" humanity by interlacing together elements of life that brings peace, harmony, happiness and dignity in their lives, and thereby adding value to their existence and survival.

Therefore, a poet is supposed to carry his or her pen, as though it were a spear, and join the war. S/he should be ferocious and fierce while at war, to be able to correct the wrongs and embrace the rights within the community and, as Ngugi observes, to "influence a people's consciousness and politics". People will judge the poet for what he or she writes and, in many ways, query his or her truth which his or her community views to be a gospel truth, a

source of information and a fountain from which the community quenches its thirst for knowledge. A poet who keeps mum while people around him or her are maimed, displaced and possibly dying is not a true poet. He or she is a dead wood of an artist. No true poet just watches as people around him or her suffer. G. V. Plekhanov (1912) in his book, *Art and Social Life*, declares that art must have a social purpose, must be an honest impression of what we see around us. Poets in this anthology have succeeded if they bring to our senses and feelings, a true and vivid description of what is going on in Ukraine. Kottarath Pankajam states:

Raining bullets, crumbling buildings  
Shattered cities, wrecked vehicles,  
People perishing, ruins everywhere  
Deaths, damages, dislocation,  
Disability, disgust and delirium  
Isolation, depression, loss, trauma

Kottarath's composition captures some images of war in Ukraine. Bombs are raining, buildings are crumbling, vehicles are exploding, people ceasing to exist, the city is shattered and there is ruin everywhere. Channah Moshe from Jerusalem, Israel, sees how "The Rubble is rumbling/like a starving polar bear/ that lies on soil parched/by climate change/eyes hungrily viewing a horizon/destitute of ice". Raphael Kieti, from Nairobi, Kenya, writes:

Ukraine!  
I cry for the tormented,  
Your cities lie in ruins  
Completely flattened  
By crude missiles and bombs

M. Chambers sees "Veils of smoke, garlanding cities/Streets decorated with sprays of rubble/that once were houses. /Burnt out vehicles casually parked/the whole tensed, ready. / In the shadows young fresh faces/clutch machine guns to themselves/like Teddy Bears." Obediah Michael Smith, from the Bahamas, finds it ironic that the aim of war is human flesh. He wonders why war uses such massive resources and force to end a life. In "War Bares its Teeth" Obediah asks a series of questions:

is flesh so tough  
is flesh not tender enough  
for knives and forks  
to stick and cut  
why the need

for so much firepower  
is it not overkill  
the rockets, the bombs

The aim of war is destruction of human flesh; therein lies its inhumanity. Sujata Dash in "We Need to Look Within " advises that we need to look beyond politics to stop war, since it benefits no one. Molly Joseph in "Ukraine the World is With You" wonders whether war has ever benefited anyone. Monsif Beroual in "Human Prevails, Not Wars" observes that we are all one universal family and when we go to war it is against ourselves:

There is only one family  
Shaped into different colors  
With different beliefs  
Separate into different nations  
And only love shall prevail  
To embrace all one day, not  
wars.

Varsha Das, in "Resounding Echoes" observes that borders or boundaries misguide us into thinking that we are different when we are not:

Yes, I speak a different language,  
eat different food, wear different clothes,  
the colour of my skin is different,  
but I was born exactly the way  
the girl across the border was born,  
was breastfed as she was,  
and was loved by my parents,  
exactly as she was.

A person in one country has a heart that “throbs with the same rhythm” as a person in another. She adds that all of us have the same colour of blood. In regard to these facts we find ourselves confronted by the question: If war has no tangible benefit, why the zest to fight and to win? Here is Zakiyyah G.E. Capehart, in “Can War Bring Peace?”:

What is war good for?  
An opportunity for power  
to beget more power  
Multitudes of men, women  
and children die

Capehart alludes to the quest for power as the main drive. In Linda M. Crate’s poem, “I Hope that the Ukraine Will Know Freedom Once More” she regrets that greed for power has led to loss of humanity, great suffering and devastating experience. She states:

wars are such ugly things,  
and it makes my heart sad  
that greedy men can decide they  
want a country and simply invade  
feeling entitled to something  
that is not theirs...

As poet after poet mentions greed as the stimulant for war, we need to go back in history and interrogate similar wars and conflicts: We recall the time of the Crusades (1095-1291), the French Revolution (1789-1799), the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) and the Cold War (1946-1991). We also have an Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, ongoing since 1920. Additionally, we may recall wars in Vietnam (1955-1975), Soviet-Afghan War, Iraq-Iran War (1980-1988), Gulf War (1990-1991), U.S.-Afghan War (2001-2021) and Iraq War (2003-2011). None of these conflicts have achieved anything, except the loss of lives, the wastage of massive resources, harm to people's culture, destruction of architecture, and damage to the environment and wildlife.

In conclusion we shall infer that poets in this anthology do not peddle unnecessary hatred, or preach animosity and enmity. Rather they "create" another humanity, moulding it into elements of peace and weaving into their lives some dignity. They write their poetry to express sacredness for human life and to honour every individual, as they are, be they black, white, yellow, brown, or be they Russian, Ukrainian, Palestinian, Iranian, Iraqi, Assyrian, Armenian, Turkmen, Chaldean, Vietnamese, Afghanistan, African, or be they Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Kurds, Jewish, etc.

We further conclude that art is not created for its own sake, but for a purpose. It must not be an empty imagination, but a product of developments within the society in which the artist lives. In traditional times in Africa where I live, the griots used to act as social and political commentators. They were not afraid to speak their truths the way they knew it. The poets in this anthology, like our African griots, fulfill one function of an artist, that of keeping up with our needs. Society, "demands that the writer, as a public voice, assume a responsibility to reflect public concerns in his writings" (Chinweizu, et al, 1975, p.37). In other words, I hope, this anthology demonstrates a sense of social commitment, the duty of any artist.

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