

Two dead soldiers
by Jean Arasanayagam
Semester VI (CBCS): World Literatures

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Two dead soldiers in bronze
Lying flat on a battlefield,
Anywhere.
Dismembered trunks and heads,
Severed membranes, nerves
Are tangled threads wrapped in blood,
Freezing in ice or clotted with mud.
They have no eyes,
they have no tongues
Sightless and blind and speechless
Shreds of rags
Flutter in the miserable wind
To cover the corpses.
The cloth, the flesh, the skin
Are of one colour and one texture.
Outflung and still the cracked bone
Of the broken arm, its crooked wing, unpinioned.
Unweaponed, the slack fingers of those
Useless hands.
Two dead soldiers
are a whole battlefield
Two faces, a million.

Jean Arasanayagam (1931-2019) is a Sri Lankan poet and fiction writer. Born, Jean Solomons in a Dutch Burgher family, Jean married a Sri Lankan Tamil which led her to multiple heritages of her identity. She has written profusely in English basically on the theme of ethnic and religious turmoil in Sri Lanka. She was a witness to the colonial and postcolonial sociopolitical changes that affect the dynamics of ethnic, gender and class relations in Sri Lanka. She was a victim of ethnic and political violence of 1983. Along with the search for identity, death is a recurring theme in her poetry. She has written nearly fifty books. She died on 30 July 2019.

The present poem clearly points out the futility(pointlessness) of war. The detailed description of the battered(beatn up) bodies of the two soldiers is representative of the condition of a million soldiers. All this signifies the brutalities and destruction caused by war. The bizzare description of destruction and nauseating(sickening) bloodshed loudly convey her position on war. The poem is written on the backdrop of the ethnic and political violence in Sri-Lanka. Being a victim of this violence, Arasanayagam's observations become quite relevant. It describes the mutilated bodies of two soldiers. They are dead and therefore useless in the war. Their plight after death speaks about the indifference to dead soldiers; their sacrifice goes unrewarded. The poem speaks of two dead soldiers, but the poem is representative of the condition of millions who die on the battlefield. The poem is universal in the sense the situation is not only about Sri-Lankan soldiers. It is true for soldiers anywhere in the world, no matter to which religion, ethnic group, caste they belong to. The poem describes the dead bodies that are battered so badly that their identity cannot be ascertained. The colour of blood is the only visible colour. It is same for everyone. Hence, it is a representative poem.

Analysis:

The poem "Two Dead Soldiers" describes the battered bodies of two dead soldiers. But it is not about the death of two soldiers. It is about the futility of war. The poem neither mentions the names of the soldiers nor the names of the warring countries. Nor is it clear whether they belong to adversary countries or two factions in the same country. This indicates that the soldiers or their identity is not important but their 'death' is important. The twenty one-line poem in fact describes the effect of the death of the soldiers.

The poem consists of twenty one lines divided into seven stanzas of unequal number of lines. All through the poem the poet does not lose sight of the focus – the bizarre description of destruction and the nauseating bloodshed that she has been a witness to. Born in a Dutch family and married into a Tamil family, she had a multi- ethnic identity and was viewed as a refugee and not belonging to Sri Lanka. War according to her serves the petty interests of a few at the cost of destruction of many others. This situation is universal and not limited to any one country or ethnic group. The poem succeeds in arousing distaste for war through the disturbing descriptions of violence, war and death. Death is a recurrent theme, a motif in her poems.

The poem begins by describing the abandoned, battered dead bodies of two soldiers on a battlefield. The word 'anywhere' is sufficient to highlight the fact that the scene is universal. The bodies are in a very bad shape- some body parts lie scattered, the nerves are cut, and there is blood everywhere, wet or dry. The bodies are lying in mud and now that the soldiers

are dead their value is also same, like dust or mud. Obviously, the dead soldiers cannot see or speak because they are dead. But it seems that the poet also comments upon the callous(heartless) people around, who have eyes and tongues but are unable to see or express the futility of war. The bodies have no shrouds, coffins to cover them and are left to flutter in the miserable wind. This speaks for the apathy towards the soldiers who have sacrificed their lives in the battle. They do not get any honour or respect. Nothing but blood is what remains. The hands /arms that held weapons and fought bravely are now useless.

The last three lines sum up the theme of the poem in a brief way. These are just two dead soldiers – but the situation represents a whole battlefield. The description should be enough to imagine the dire consequences of war. They may actually be two faces but they represent a million faceless soldiers over the world. The poem is very straight forward and remarkable for its brevity. Short cryptic lines and highly effective adjectives are the key to the immense effect of the poem. The use of visual images of colour of blood, its shades and texture are quite vivid and successfully convey the theme.