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A View from Below

Female Lament and Defiance in Times of War¹

Woe, woe is me!
What words, or cries, or lamentations can I utter?
Ah me! for the sorrows of my closing years!
for slavery too cruel to brook or bear! . . .
Where is any god or power divine to succour me? . . .
Life on earth has no more charm for me . . .
Queen of sorrows.
—EURIPIDES²

To the women of Afghanistan and Iraq, that we may hear the lamentations of their hearts . . .

The image does not vanish from either my mind or my heart. A house destroyed in Iraq by coalition forces battling resistance insurgents. “Collateral damage” is the sanitized and cynical term coined for this kind of tragic mistake. A family decimated, some members killed, others wounded, the

1. Paper read in “‘The View From Below,’ The Bonhoeffer Lectures on Public Ethics.” October 12, 2004. Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC.

2. Euripides, *Hecuba*, 26.

survivors walking in shock, as lifeless specters. An old Iraqi woman, the matriarch of the family, stands in the middle of what used to be her house, and raises her gaunt face and wrinkled hands to the sky. Her countenance is an expression of immense affliction. Is she praying, crying to her God, cursing, or just wailing her profound distress? Is it an act of lamentation, of defiance, or both? We do not know and will probably never know.

Her photographic depiction, alas, will never fade away from my memory. It has become another portrait of the sorrows and pains inflicted by war upon the souls and bodies of women.³ The image of that suffering, praying, cursing, lamenting, defiant Iraqi woman is the Ariadne's thread of this essay, its guiding leitmotiv even through what for some readers might be its labyrinthine incursions into classical Hellenic literature. It belongs to the tradition of Francisco Goya's powerful and horrifying etchings *The Disasters of War*.

SIMONE WEIL AND THE TRAGIC EPIC OF WAR

"The true hero, the real subject, the core of the *Iliad*, is might."⁴ Thus begins Simone Weil's "The *Iliad*, Poem of Might," her splendid meditation on the most eminent Hellenic poetic text. It is a magnificent *tour de force*. The delicate and sensitive Weil, a prematurely withered genius, contemplates the sorrows and horrors of war, the cruelties and violence committed in the name of so many proclaimed ideals, in the altar of so many deceptively sacralized words. Weil pays tribute in a beautiful way to the awful immensity of the griefs and pains, the dashed hopes and illusions, caused by the violence of war.

Yet, also evident is the immense admiration that Weil feels reading the *Iliad*. She relishes in the aesthetic grace of Homeric Greek (the learned Weil read the *Iliad* in its original language): "nothing of all that the peoples of Europe have produced is worth the first poem to have appeared among them."⁵ And, most of all, she deeply admires the courage of Patroclus, Hector, or Achilles when their turn to confront fate and death comes. There can be no doubt about the preference of this woman, of Jewish ancestry, for

3. On the portraits of the violence and sorrows of war, see Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

4. Weil, "Iliad, Poem of Might," 153. The original reads: "Le vrai héros, le vrai sujet, le centre de l'Iliade, c'est la force." Weil, "L'Iliade ou le poème de la force," tome 2:3, 227.

5. "Iliad, Poem of Might," 183.

Homer over Moses, for the *Iliad* over *Genesis*, for the Greek language and culture over the Hebrew language and culture (also over the Roman culture and language).

Affliction is the unavoidable consequence of all human wars, cursed by the caprice and malice of the gods and by the human proclivity towards violence and force.⁶ The human soul is overwhelmed by the rage and affliction of Achilles, saddened by the death of his dearest friend, Patroclus, impressed by the courage of Hector, beaten and mercilessly killed by Achilles, and, according to Weil, awed also by the agony of Jesus, when the hour of his arrest, torment, and execution is near.⁷ “Unless protected by an armour of lies, man cannot endure might without suffering a blow in the depth of his soul.”⁸ Not many writers would join in the same story Achilles and Jesus!

War, according to Weil’s elegant essay, is always very near, too near indeed, to the human heart. No other human endeavor compares to war in its ability to achieve the terrifying process of converting a human being into a *thing*, a non-person. By transforming living bodies into corpses, spiritual life into mere matter, and by inspiring overwhelming cruelty and violence in hearts where, on many previous occasions, tenderness and mercy have reigned, war becomes the most dehumanizing of all human enterprises. It spreads affliction and agony across all social and intimate borders. It poisons the human heart and dissolves compassion. In the reign of violence, of the immense destruction and affliction unleashed by human bellicosity, “there is no room for either justice or prudence.”⁹

The transformation of victim and victimizer from human beings into things is painfully shown in Achilles’ refusal to heed the supplications of Hector and Priam. Hector has killed Patroclus and must therefore die in the hands of Achilles. No tears of a father, a wife or a son, will protect the brave Trojan prince from his fateful destiny.¹⁰ And Achilles knows very well that he also, the killer of Hector, must die young, victim of a violent rage similar

6. See her essay, “Love of God and Affliction,” 439–68.

7. “*Iliad*, Poem of Might,” 180: “The accounts of the Passion show that a divine spirit united to the flesh is altered by affliction, trembles before suffering and death, feels himself, at the moment of deepest agony, separated from men and from God.”

8. *Ibid.*, 182.

9. *Ibid.*, 163.

10. Weil’s translation and reading of Achilles’ rejection of Priam’s supplication has been disputed. See Benfey, “Tale of Two *Iliads*,” 82. Yet Benfey’s critique does not affect the core of Weil’s argument, namely, that the raging violence of war impedes Achilles from heeding the supplication of a father, Priam, anguished by the fate of his son, Hector.

to his, away from the loving care of mother or lover. Affliction, courage, destruction, and death: these are the consequences of war. And the choice of war, that most lethal of all human enterprises, seems to elude personal liberty and ethical deliberation. War seems to be an unavoidable dimension of human destiny, so fated and cursed by the gods. *Thanatos* triumphs over *eros* or *agape*, this seems a reasonable way of reading the *Iliad*.

The *Iliad* is therefore, according to Weil, more than a magnificent and beautiful epic poem. It also discloses the tragic mystery of human violence, the ways in which human beings ceaselessly mutate into instruments of death and devastation. Fate and tragedy rule tyrannically over human affairs. Good and evil human beings are both crushed by the same violence that periodically demonically possesses human history. The discovery of this fateful truth is the great achievement of classic Greece, poetically narrated first by Homer's epic, then by Attic tragedy, and finally by the Gospels—"the last and most marvelous expression of Greek genius, as the *Iliad* is its first expression."¹¹

Weil's essay is doubtless an expression of her love for the classic Greek culture,¹² but it is more than that. It is also a deeply sensitive, eloquent, and serene meditation on the manners in which war destroys human culture and, even more importantly, human compassion. It was published in December 1940 and January 1941, in the French journal *Cahiers du Sud*, at a crucial moment when Europe was beginning its engulfment in the vortex of the most savage war that history has ever experienced. It is both a warning against any kind of romantic beautification of war, by means of the ideological manipulations of solemn words—fatherland, race, nation, God, religion, liberty—and a convocation to epic and stoic confrontation of the merciless fate, death, and destruction entailed by war.

Her essay is a warning and evocation she knows very well will not be heeded. For, according to Weil, the modern state is a Leviathan poised to oppress and devour by means of the constant mobilization and preparation for war. Thus it achieves its goal of "the total effacement of the individual before the state bureaucracy."¹³ If Weil admires the dignified and courageous ethos of the tragic Homeric heroes, she has nothing but contempt for modern technological warfare and for the states that wage it (whatever

11. "*Iliad*, Poem of Might," 180.

12. Weil's writings display her love for the Hellenic culture as well as her peculiar disdain for the Hebrew and Roman roots of Western civilization.

13. "Reflections on War," 246.

their ideological pigmentations). It is a “most atrocious” activity, “the most radical form of oppression,” for soldiers, in modern warfare, “do not expose themselves to death, they are sent to slaughter.” It transforms the relationship between state and citizens into “despotism and enslavement” and “calculated murder.”¹⁴

No epic poem like the *Iliad* could be composed in honor of the modern system of devastation. For “modern war is absolutely different from everything designated by that name under earlier regimes.”¹⁵ It creates immense miseries devoid of any human integrity. There are no more tragic heroic warriors, like Agamemnon, Hector, Patroclus, or Achilles, but expendable pawns trained to slaughter and be slaughtered. No supplications are refused, for no supplications are heard. Painful lamentations are uttered, but they are immediately drowned by the cascade of chauvinistic propaganda, with its loquacious public convincers, and by the cynical conversion of military destruction into electronic spectacle.

This radical rejection of modern technological warfare leads Weil into an agonizing dilemma: What to do regarding the fascist and Nazi menace? Before the German invasion first of Poland and then of France, Weil assumed a firm position against war, for “weapons yielded by a sovereign state apparatus can bring no one liberty.”¹⁶ In case war erupts, she counsels revolt against the military machine of one’s own state.

It is a desperate and forlorn situation, she knows it well. “But the helplessness one feels . . . cannot exempt one from remaining faithful to oneself.” Thus, she proclaims resistance not against the possible invading enemy, but against the state and military apparatus “that calls itself our defender and makes us slaves.”¹⁷ She will discover the fragility of that position when the Nazi and fascist armies begin to spread devastation all over Europe, as never before since the Thirty Years War (1618–1648). Then the immense lamentations uttered by so many distressed and downtrodden human beings will provoke a deep sorrow in Weil’s sensitive soul that will escort her into the shadows of her own death. Death was sometimes the ultimate consolation for a delicate spirit unable to cope with the tensions of an epoch so aptly called the “Age of Extremes.”¹⁸ As befits a lover of the *Iliad*

14. *Ibid.*, 242, 246.

15. *Ibid.*, 241.

16. *Ibid.*, 242.

17. *Ibid.*, 248.

18. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*.

and the Greek tragedies, she faced death with the fortitude of an epic heroine. Fortunately, she also left us an amazing literary heritage¹⁹ that might provide a perspective to meditate upon our own times, an age when . . .

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned . . .²⁰

EURIPIDES AND THE WOES OF THE TROJAN WOMEN

When revisited in the context of today's theoretical debates, one is struck by the glaring absence in Weil's "The *Iliad*, Poem of Might" of a feminist gaze. The essay deals splendidly with the tragic and dignified manner in which Patroclus, Achilles, Hector, Agamemnon, and Priam confront fate and death, to be finally crushed by the violence unleashed by war. A man, a male hero, stands in the center of her meditation on the *Iliad*, as well as in her allusions to the Attic tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles, and to the Jesus of the Gospels. One could even perceive a certain seduction in Weil's contemplation of the Homeric heroes, a paradoxical fascination of the courageous dignity with which these warriors assume their tragic destiny and curse. But, what about the Trojan women? Curiously, this very sensitive and perceptive woman and writer, Simone Weil, silences them. A writer that would never heed Aristotle's apothegm—"Woman, silence is the grace of woman"²¹—ends up by silencing the female victims of the *Iliad*'s courageous heroes.²²

Weil clearly understands the awful consequences of the destruction of a city, be it Troy, Warsaw, or Paris. And yet, as she follows the *Iliad*'s concern with Patroclus, Achilles, Hector, Agamemnon, and Priam, something important is missed: the agonies and sorrows of Iphigenia, Hecuba, Andromache, Cassandra, Polyxena, and Helen, the female protagonists of the Trojan conflict. It is an epic poem of war and force, therefore, Weil seems to be saying, men, not women, should always take the center stage. She seems to overlook that the city is also the place where women not only give birth to human existence, but also confer meaning and coherence to

19. Coles, *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage*.

20. Yeats, "Second Coming," 820.

21. Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. I, 1260a 30. Aristotle is quoting Sophocles, "Ajax," 293.

22. For a different perspective, see Courtine-Denamys, *Three Women in Dark Times: Edith Stein, Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil*.

the life they have procreated. The destruction of a city entails therefore not only the death of the warriors, but also the enduring misery and distress of captive women. Thus the anonymous author of the biblical *Lamentations* poignantly feminizes the devastated city of Jerusalem:

How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!

She that was a princess among the provinces
has become a vassal.

She weeps bitterly in the night,
with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her,
they have become her enemies.²³

The curse of war, violence and blood as unavoidable human destiny, seems to be the tragic enigma so beautifully displayed in the earliest Hellenic epic poem. Weil indicates the diverse instances in which that iron law of human destruction could have been disavowed. If only Agamemnon, Achilles, Odysseus, or Hector would have been more moderate in their words or actions . . . And yet, the warriors seem unable to free themselves from the bloody fascination with Ares, the merciless god of war. The curse of war proceeds unimpeded on its path of death and devastation. Yes, indeed, but what about the affliction suffered by the mothers, wives, daughters, lovers, or sisters of the heroic warriors? What about the agonizing sorrow felt by the female nourishers of human existence when struck by the pathos of ferocious destruction? What about the misery visited upon those women who have never wielded a sword or spear and have never curtailed prematurely the life of another fellow human being?

Weil shares the preference of many of her contemporaries for the “classic” style of Aeschylus’ and Sophocles’ tragedies over Euripides’s more secular and profane outlook. Yet, it was Euripides who never forgot that the Trojan War began not only with the abduction of Helen, a matter to which he devoted one play, but also with the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the unfortunate

23. *Lamentations* 1:1–2. With the exception of *Job*, Weil tends to disregard with contempt the Hebrew sacred scriptures.

young daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra.²⁴ The wars of men seem to require, at their beginning or at their conclusions, the sacrifice of a young maiden, be it that of Iphigenia, so that the war against Troy may proceed; that of Polyxena, the young daughter of Priam and Hecuba, sacrificed by Neoptolemus at Achilles' tomb, so that the ships of the victorious Greeks may depart for home;²⁵ or that of the nameless daughter of Jephthah, so that the vow between her father, the male commander of the Hebrew forces, and Yahweh, the Lord of Hosts, may be fulfilled.²⁶ These stories seem to question Freud's thesis that the source of human religiosity is the sacrifice, by the band of sons and brothers, of the mythical primeval father;²⁷ and suggest that one should rather look into the sacrifice of a virginal daughter of the Patriarch as the matrix of ritual practices of expiation and atonement. Men make war; the gods lust for the blood and flesh of young virgins.

It is also Euripides who in one of his more popular tragedies gives careful attention to the female lamentations in the midst of the Trojan War. He knows well that after the noisy devastation of war ceases, another clamor resounds, "the endless cries of captured women, assigned as slaves to various Greeks."²⁸ In *The Women of Troy*, the plight of Hecuba, Andromache, and Cassandra is voiced. Not the brave and epic heroism of men of war, but the sorrows of the women who suffer its sinister consequences constitute the focus of this splendid drama.

As F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp has emphasized in another literary context, the poetic expression of profound existential grief is able to at least provide coherence and meaning, if not comfort or solace, to that grief.²⁹ For, as the Chorus sings in *The Women of Troy*,

In times of sorrow it is a comfort to lament,
To shed tears, and find music that will voice our grief.³⁰

24. See Euripides, "Iphigenia in Tauris" and "Iphigenia in Aulis."

25. See Euripides, "Hecuba," in *The Complete Greek Drama*, Vol. I, 818–19. This eloquent text, dealing with the sacrifice of Polyxena, might have resonances of earlier sacrifices of maidens to propitiate the gods or expiate transgressions of sacred laws.

26. *Judges* 11:29–40. Yahweh did not provide a substitute for Jephthah's unfortunate daughter. A comparison with the story of Abraham and Isaac might suggest that gender distinction makes quite a difference in the way the God of Israel deals with the cultic rite of human sacrifice.

27. See Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1937).

28. Euripides, "Women of Troy," 90.

29. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*.

30. "Women of Troy," 110.

Yes, indeed. But, alas, the poetic dirge also aggravates and deepens the afflictions. It reawakens the experienced nightmares.³¹ Hecuba, Priam's widow and Hector's mother, former queen of Troy, and now allotted to be a slave of Odysseus, the Greek general most disdained by the Trojan aristocracy, for he is a tricky deceiver, a master of lies, and weaver of fatal wiles, takes the lead by uttering a profoundly sad and heartrending expression of grief:

I mourn for my dead world, my burning town,
My sons, my husband, gone, all gone! . . .
Now shrunk to nothing, sunk in mean oblivion!

How must I deal with grief? . . .
For those whom Fate has cursed
Music itself sings but one note—
Unending miseries, torment and wrong!³²

Andromache, widow of Hector, will have to contemplate the assassination of her only child, Astyanax, and suffer the lordship of Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles. She is forced to serve the murderer of her child, who is also the son of the warrior who killed her loved husband.

To be dead is . . . better far than living on wretchedness.
The dead feel nothing; evil then can cause no pain.
But one who falls from happiness to unhappiness
Wanders bewildered in a strange and hostile world.³³

Andromache's body belongs now to the will of a hated man, who will dispose of it according to his whims and desires. For the rest of life, she will be a slave in a foreign land and a hostile house, devoid of any shred of hope of liberty or domestic happiness. During the days she will be subject to all kinds of exhausting toils, during the nights she will dread her master's lust.

So I shall live a slave
In the house of the very man who struck my husband dead.
If I put from me my dear Hector's memory . . .
I prove a traitor to the dead; but if I hate
This man, I shall be hateful to my own master.³⁴

31. See Dorfman, *Death and the Maiden*.

32. "Women of Troy," 93.

33. *Ibid.*, 111.

34. *Ibid.*, 112.

Both Hecuba and Andromache are burdened not only by the extreme misery to which they have fallen, but also by the absence of any meaningful hope for redemption. Any remembrance of past joys, in the alleys and gardens of lovely Troy, can only aggravate their present predicament. Any consideration of forthcoming events, as slaves (“a shadow of death—a slave!”³⁵) in Ithaca, Athens, Sparta, or Argos, can only deepen their sufferings. There is no mental space for hope, for the imagination of a joyful and meaningful future.

Andromache laments the absolute impossibility of dreaming her liberation from abject servitude.

For me there is not even
The common refuge, hope. I cannot cheat myself
With sweet delusions of some future happiness.³⁶

A similar lament comes from the heart of Hecuba.

Hope is dead; today I know
The last throes of misery!³⁷

In another Euripides’ drama, Polyxena, a young daughter of Priam and Hecuba, expresses analogous hopelessness. Odysseus has informed her of the tragic decision by the Greek army: that the maiden be sacrificed at Achilles’ tomb, to honor the brave Achaean warrior. Polyxena rejects her mother’s pleas and refuses to supplicate clemency. She prefers to die rather than live as a slave.

Why should I prolong my days? . . .
Was I nursed . . . a maiden marked amid her fellows,
equal to a goddess, save for death alone,
but now a slave!
That name first makes me long for death . . .
No, never! Here I close my eyes upon the light
Free as yet, and dedicate myself to Hades. . . .
For I see naught within my reach to make me hope
or expect with any confidence
that I am ever again to be happy.³⁸

35. *Ibid.*, 96.

36. *Ibid.* 112

37. *Ibid.*, 99.

38. “Hecuba,” 814.

Those heartfelt woes, however, have to be expressed with utmost discretion, for, as slaves, they have lost the liberty to express openly their affliction or indignation. Their submission has to be complete, leaving no room even for their own inner selves. After hearing the horrifying news about the sentence of death decreed for her only child, Andromache is warned by the Greek messenger to accept her tragic fate in silence and submission.

This too: don't call down
Curses upon the Greeks. . . .
If you are quiet . . .
You'll find the Achaeans more considerate to yourself.³⁹

CASSANDRA: FROM LAMENT TO DEFIANCE

Pain is thus mercilessly multiple: the death of the loved ones, the bondage of slavery, the extinction of hope, the masquerade of submission, and the silencing of lamentation and protest. Slavery, submission, hopelessness, simulation, silence: that is the cruel destiny of the captive Trojan women.

With one exception: Cassandra. A beautiful Trojan princess, a consecrated virgin to the altar of Apollo, Cassandra has been sacrilegiously chosen by Agamemnon as his slave and concubine, a toy for his lust and pleasure. Hecuba, her mother, is in pain for the fate of her daughter, compelled to serve the most implacable enemy of her city and people. Cassandra, however, fearlessly sings her disdain for the triumphant Achaeans, and intones a hymn in honor of the dead Trojan warriors.

How different for the men of Troy, whose glory it was
To die defending their own country! Those who fell
Were carried back by comrades to their homes, prepared
For burial by hands they loved, and laid to rest
In the land that bore them . . . joys denied
To the invaders.⁴⁰

When her mother laments her lot ("A slave taken in war, a plunder of a conquering Greek"⁴¹), Cassandra, endowed by Apollo with prophetic powers, celebrates, not her submission, but the future catastrophe and tragedy of the house of Agamemnon, the cursed lineage of Atreus. She,

39. "Women of Troy," 114.

40. *Ibid.* 103.

41. *Ibid.* 102.

prophetsess of doom, foresees the homicidal rage of Clytemnestra, who has not forgotten the sacrifice of Iphigenia and who will not forgive Agamemnon the introduction at her house of the young and beautiful Trojan, as his concubine. Cassandra's cries of woes mutate into resistance and defiance, vociferously singing and celebrating the assassination of Agamemnon, the oldest son of Atreus, by the hands of his own wife, an event that will transform his military victory into defeat and tragedy.

Agamemnon,
This famous king, shall find me a more fatal bride
Than Helen. I shall kill him and destroy his house
In vengeance for my brothers' and my father's death. . . .
My bridal-bed promises death to my worst enemy . . .

At the porch of death my bridegroom waits for me.
Great chief of the Hellenes, fleeting shadow of magnificence,
Your accursed life shall sink in darkness to an accursed grave . . .

I will come triumphant to the house of Death,
When I have brought to ruin the sons of Atreus, who destroyed
us.⁴²

She is the only captive Trojan woman who is able to metamorphose her misery and slavery into defiance and resistance. As her sister Polyxena, Cassandra willingly accepts her premature and violent death as unavoidable destiny. But, in a unique way, she is also able to deny her captors any honor and rejoices in the tragic reversal of destiny that awaits the Argive royal house. She calls forth the inner strength, the unconquerable pathos, able to reject the iron logic of war by assuming and accepting in her own self the death and sacrifice entailed by that logic. Cassandra is graced by a feminine fortitude and bravery sometimes unperceived by readers who, like Simone Weil, are fascinated by the seductive and poetic male heroism of the *Iliad*.

Thus Euripides, in a very different way from Aristophanes' delicious comedy "Lysistrata,"⁴³ not only gives voice to women's sufferings and lamentations as ominous consequences of war, but also foregrounds, in the character of Cassandra,⁴⁴ female defiance and resistance to violence and

42. Ibid., 102–105.

43. Aristophanes, "Lysistrata," Vol. II, 803–60. This is the literary source of that famous anti-war slogan: "Make love, not war!"

44. Similar resistance and defiance are also expressed by Andromache's fierce

destruction. Thus, early in the origins of our cultural and historical awareness, in the creative period between Homer and Euripides, the vast dramatic canvas of war and affliction, violence and defiance, military oppression and obstinate resistance is magnificently displayed. We can admire the courage of the ill-fated Hector and Achilles, yet share as well the afflictions of Hecuba and Andromache, marvel at the dignity of Polyxena's choice of death rather than slavery, and rejoice in the resistance and defiance of Cassandra under the sinister shadows of war and death.

GRIEVING BETWEEN BURKAS AND BOMBS

"The whole *Iliad* is overshadowed by the greatest of griefs that can come among men; the destruction of a city."⁴⁵ Thus Simone Weil summarizes the tragic drama of the most famous Hellenic epic poem. In the beginning there was war. Yes indeed, and throughout the entire human history, cities have been destroyed and lamentations have been uttered to express the profound afflictions entailed by such catastrophes. The pathos of war has too frequently defeated the ethos of peace. The biblical lament over the devastated Jerusalem echoes the agonies of the dwellers of many other destroyed cities:

Jerusalem remembers
in the days of her affliction and
wandering. . . .
When her people fell into the hand
of the foe. . . .
My eyes flow with rivers of tears
because of the destruction of
my people.⁴⁶

Of all the afflictions narrated by the anonymous Hebrew poet, the most heartrending are the descriptions of the agony of the women survivors of the catastrophe, who face the horrifying temptation of maternal cannibalism.

Should women eat their offspring,
the children they have borne? . . .

confrontation with Menelaus, in the play that bears as title the name of the unfortunate Trojan widow, forced to be the slave and concubine of Neoptolemus, her husband's slayer. Euripides, "Andromache," Vol. I, 843–78.

45. "*Iliad*, Poem of Might," 178.

46. *Lamentations* 1:7; 3:48.

Essays from the Margins

The hands of compassionate women
have boiled their own children:
they became their food
in the destruction of my people.⁴⁷

During the last century, the strategic understanding of war as a conflict between nations, and not only between armies, coupled with the awesome development in military technology, has made cities a choice target of attack and destruction. Picasso's *Guernica* is the artistic symbol, as Hiroshima the painful living incarnation, of the transmogrification of the city, in times of war, from a place of human fulfillment into a Dantean metaphor of hell. *Guernica*, Dresden, Hiroshima, Groznyy, Sarajevo, Kabul, Baghdad, among many other cities, have witnessed stories of affliction similar to the woes uttered in the biblical *Lamentations* or in Euripides' "Women of Troy."

Women's woes of war and their resistance against the perennial proclivity to make force the arbiter of human conflicts, have come out from the margins of history and are now in the core of the early twenty-first century labors to forge a more humane and less violent world.⁴⁸ In many different languages and cultural contexts, the sad and defiant cries to God of contemporary Hecubas, Andromechas, or Cassandras have been vociferously expressed, in lamentation and protest for the ominous divine silence and absence, enacting once more the dramatic biblical voice of grief,

I am one who has seen affliction
under the rod of God's wrath . . .
Though I call and cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer . . .
does the Lord not see it?⁴⁹

Classical Greek literature springs from aristocratic sources. Homer's *Iliad* and Euripides plays are stories of the fateful and tragic endeavors of noble and aristocratic protagonists. Achilles, Hector, and Agamemnon are neither peasants nor laborers. They are of kingly ancestry. Hecuba, Andromache, Polyxena, and Cassandra lament their drastic reversal of fortune, from royal comfort to misery and servitude. Aristocracy matters here. As the chorus of one of Euripides' dramas affirms:

47. *Lamentations* 2:20; 4:10.

48. See Mostov, "Our Women"/"Their Women," 515–29 and Boulding, "Feminist Inventions in the Art of Peacemaking," 408–38.

49. *Lamentations* 3:1, 8, 36.

Oh! To have never been born,
or sprung from noble sires,
the heir to mansions richly stored . . .
there is honour and glory for them
when they are proclaimed scions
of illustrious lines . . .⁵⁰

A more popular, more inclusive, and less aristocratic consideration of violence and afflictions is indispensable today in our analysis of the woes of women enmeshed in war. If we truly strive to understand intellectually and share emotionally the sufferings and travails of so many women in ill-fated places like Afghanistan and Iraq, plagued by the violence of native tyrants and foreign invaders, their lives and liberties threatened by burkas and bombs, we must extend the horizon of our outlook to include and highlight those devoid of noble lineage and of wealth. In desperation and defiance, today's women voice their bitter lament as the female chorus in T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*:

We know of oppression and torture,
We know of extortion and violence,
Destitution, disease,
The old without fire in winter,
The child without milk in summer,
Our labour taken away from us,
Our sins made heavier upon us.
We have seen the young man mutilated,
The torn girl trembling by the mill-stream.
And meanwhile we have gone on living . . .
Picking together the pieces . . .
For sleeping, and eating and drinking and laughter⁵¹

An international humanitarian worker has thus assessed the new situation of women in "liberated" Afghanistan: "During the Taliban era if a woman went to market and showed an inch of flesh she would have been flogged, now she's raped."⁵² Emerging from the margins of political or social power, in times of preventive and preemptive wars declared by mighty nations against weaker adversaries, the women of conflict-torn places like

50. "Andromache," 865.

51. "Murder in the Cathedral," 195.

52. Amnesty International, "Afghanistan. 'No one listens to us and no one treats us as human beings': Justice denied to Women." AI Index: ASA 11/023/2003 (October 6, 2003) 18.

Afghanistan and Iraq cry to God and to their fellow human beings for compassion and solidarity, for the recognition and restoration of their wounded and battered humanity.

The plight and woes of women in war are now being tragically replicated throughout Western Sudan, in the area of Darfur, where the female members of several ethnic groups suffer violence, abduction, rape, and sexual abuse by paramilitary groups, the so-called “Janjawid.”⁵³ The plight, endurance, and hope of oppressed Islamic women cry out to us in the powerful and painful texts of the Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi. In her novels and feminist treatises, El Saadawi has given eloquent voice to the struggles of women in Islamic societies to shape their own destiny between the burkas and the bombs, to free themselves from the dominion of priests and warriors who in the name of God or war try to possess and control female existence.⁵⁴ Her writing “smiles the smile of a woman who has lost everything and kept her soul . . . Her suffering shows in the furrows of her face, but her eyes continue to shine with an inner glow.”⁵⁵

“No one listens to us and no one treats us as human beings,”⁵⁶ is the bitter and defiant protest of so many women who confront with dignity and courage the mullahs who want to confine and constrain their body and spirit and the imperial political leaders who blindly think that bombs are the best solution for today’s complex global problems. It is our sacred duty and ethical responsibility to hear in contrition and commitment their clamors for justice and solidarity.⁵⁷

Many of us received with joy and celebration the news that Shirin Ebadi, the Iranian judge and defender of the rights of women and children in the Islamic world, was granted the 2003 Peace Noble Prize. Judge Ebadi is a courageous woman who for many years has given vibrant voice to the woes and aspirations of so many of her Islamic sisters.⁵⁸ She has also denounced with eloquence and intelligence the actions of those governments who under the guise of a cosmic and mythic “war against terror” invade

53. See Amnesty International, “Sudan, Darfur. Rape as a weapon of war: Sexual violence and its consequences.” AI Index AFR 54/076/2004 (19 July 2004).

54. See, for example, her novel *Fall of the Imam* and her literary self-portrait *Walking Through Fire: A Life of Nawal El Saadawi*.

55. *Fall of the Imam*, 24.

56. Amnesty International, “Afghanistan,” 25.

57. For a female perspective on war and peace, see Boulding, *Cultures of Peace* and Pascual Morán, *Acción civil noviolenta: fuerza de espíritu, fuerza de paz*.

58. Ebadi, *History and documentation of human rights in Iran*.

nations, curtail civil liberties, and treat with disdain and cruelty those who dare to resist, sending them to twenty-first century gulags, like the U.S. military prisons in Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, and nameless others in Afghanistan, veritable black holes where humans rights acknowledged and proclaimed by modern international law are so frequently forgotten and transgressed.⁵⁹

Yes, indeed, but what about the bewildering dissonance between our duties as citizens, usually prescribed by those whose power enable them to define today's historical conflicts in terms of national might, profit, and prestige, and Dietrich Bonhöffer's ethical demand "to see the great events of history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled—in short, from the perspective of those who suffer?"⁶⁰ This, doubtless, is the intellectual and moral dilemma faced by American citizens today, in an environment so redolent of chauvinism and jingoism, who cannot however evade, and do not desire to elude, the challenges coming "from below," from the woes of women in Islamic societies, trapped between burkas and bombs, between the religious power of the authoritarian mullahs and the military aggressiveness of the United States government, women whose woes mutate from lament to defiance to resistance.

What are we to say in such a historical context? It might be true, as Susan Sontag has recently written, that "most people will not question the rationalizations offered by their government for starting or continuing a war."⁶¹ Indeed, but not all people and not at all times. Almost five decades ago, a young African American writer, James Baldwin, raised in the bitter streets of Harlem, and wrestling with the conflict between his national identity and his quest for human justice, laid down an insightful principle that deserves to be the last sentence of this essay: "I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually."⁶²

59. Danner, *Torture and Truth*.

60. Bonhöffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 16.

61. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 38.

62. Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 9.