



CULTURE AND GENDER: RESISTANCE IN THE WAR TIME PHOTOGRAPHS BY LEE MILLER

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Abstract: This paper observes and analyses some of Lee Miller's famous photographs and its various social and cultural aspects. It primarily looks into the facet of gender and surrealism in her photographs to trace how she resists and questions the violence unleashed by the Second World War. By using gender and surrealism as tool, she has transformed camera into an object of female gaze to document the politics of violence and resistance. Miller uses her camera to file the female experiences of the war, thus femininity and female bodies become important elements in her photographs. Miller's treatment of female body for marking her protest against war and violence is studied in detail in this paper.

Key words: Art of capturing, War photography, Gender, Culture, Surrealism, Resistance, Protest, Male and Female gaze.

"I'm extremely irritable quite often and especially when I don't understand people. I'm inclined to scream...when...people try to tell me that the bombed out Hofbrau Haus won't make me an interesting picture because it is all destroyed, that there is no use photographing the local monuments because they are ruined ...I'm busy making documents, not art..."(Salvio 522)

Lee Miller marked herself in the history of photography by fusing Surrealist and autobiographical influences. Known to the world and art historians as the model of Man Ray's Surrealist-inspired photographic images truncated torsos and nudes she has also contributed great deal to photojournalism. Lee Miller made her entry to the fashion world as a model. Not long after her tryst with Conde Nat, which led to her entry into the fashion world she became the cover girl of *Vogue*. Miller was photographed by several eminent photographers like Edward Steichen, Arnold Genthe, and Horst P Horst etc. She developed enduring friendship with these photographers and learned from all of them the art of photography. Later the tutelage of Man Ray also equipped her with tools necessary for an innovative photographer. Miller's life as a photographer started as a fashion photographer at *Vogue*. Later on she received accreditation as a photojournalist with the United States Army and followed the Allied advance across Europe. This paper observes and analyses some of her famous photographs and its various social and cultural aspects.

Lee Miller entered the scenario of photojournalism in 1939 when World War II was gaining momentum. This background has reflected itself in her works. She started her career as a fashion photographer and later on moved to the realm of photojournalism at warfronts. As

a fashion magazine at the time of war, Vogue was playing an important role helping women cope with the difficulties and challenges of war like cloth rationing and entry of women into the working force. In these photographs taken by Miller advertising the war time clothing and hairstyles an air of surrealism can be found. "The female genius embodied in the photojournalism of Lee Miller is exemplary of the strengths of surrealism as a mode for encountering and representing traumatic histories" (Salvio 525). In the photograph *Women in fire masks*, Downshire hill, Hampstead, London, 1941 photographed during the blitz, and published in American Vogue as a part of a feature that aimed to show how British women were able to cope with the conflicts some of the surrealist tendencies of Miller is expressed. The easy posture of one of the models and the calm expression on the face of the other model contrast with the bizarre looking masks. "Like futuristic appendages, the ungainly metallic pieces incongruously rest upon their softly feminine wearers." (Davis 2) Thus this picture becomes a juxtaposition of a masculine apparatus of war and the feminine body. Here the masks acquire a surrealist quality and become an apparatus used by authority to cover the casualty of war upon woman and to claim it has done some good. It becomes the representative of the modern warfare and how it has been imposed upon the feminine. Thus this particular photograph communicates a strong optical unconscious.

Lee Miller was able to take the position of male photographers who covered the war front once they left for military service. Miller strongly believed that it was the personality of the photographer that mattered more than technical genius. This perspective of her was reflected in most of the photographs. Subjected to rape at the very young age of seven and being in a weird relation with her father who was interested in taking scopophilic images of her, Miller's personal traumas often marked themselves in the photographs they took. Her revenge towards violence and impact of the violence upon the culture often found place in her works. Miller's 1940 photograph *Revenge on Culture* is one of the widely reproduced pictures of her. The image portrays a sculpture which has been destroyed during the war. It is the pictorial representation of the impact of the war upon the artefacts. It summarises the physical destruction brought by the war. It communicates how the civilization has been brought down by the act of war. Beyond this symbolism, the picture portrays the torso of a woman. One breast and nipple is visible while another is covered by a brick. The eye of the sculptor is smeared with dirt and dust. Beyond the obliteration of a city and wreckage of civilization the photograph refers to Miller herself. Miller, who possessed the classical proportions of beauty, became the model for Man Ray's photographs of truncated torsos and nudes. She may have found an element that can be related to her in this classical sculpture that was damaged beyond restoration similarly to the serious mental trauma she was suffering from during this period of her life when she worked as a photojournalism at the warfront.

Miller's another celebrated photograph *Remington Silent* (1940) also communicates a strong message from war time. It shows a Remington typewriter which has been shattered beyond mending. Like *Revenge on Culture* this image also tells about the impact of violence on the culture and freedom of expression. The surrealist in Miller is visible in the very selection of subject. "Although Miller did not physically transform the typewriter herself, she was drawn to this relatively small object located within a wide field of rubble, and elevated it to the status of art by the act of framing it within the lens of her camera." (Davis 4)

The portrayal of women in the photographs of Lee Miller is exceptional. As a female photojournalist working in the war field she has tried to bring into focus the valour as well as the struggles of women in the time of war. Miller's Vogue photos often stand for propaganda, where she makes a conscious attempt to influence the war time behaviour of the readers according to the media guidelines from British ministry of information. *Fashion for Factories*,

Vogue Studio, London, England, 1940 is a photograph in which a factory outfit is advertised. A model is posing in factory worker's uniform with goggles and a trendy scarf tied around her hair. Through this image women are shown how to adapt to war, and are urged to keep calm and carry on. *Women in Fire Masks*, Downshire Hill, London, England, 1941 promotes air raid precautions. In both these pictures the conflict and tension between women and war is cunningly covered. The power relation between Miller the photographer and the models of these images are imbalanced. Miller has a visible upper hand over these models and she is cleverly using them for propaganda. The fear of these models is covered up with a calmness that is imposed upon them. Thus we can say that the agency of the female subject in the photographs is questioned here, as they are forced to represent something entirely different from what they feel.

Once Miller started to work in the war front she made attempts to bring into focus various women figures who toiled in the war front. *Anna Leska*, Air Transport Auxiliary, Polish pilot flying a spitfire, White Waltham, Berkshire, England 1942 is a photograph of a flight lieutenant wearing a helmet and goggles and looking over the shoulder grinning at somebody. She is preparing for a take off by reflecting pride and happiness for being in a position typically controlled by men. Leska was one of the three Polish women who served in the air force and was a part of ATA. The women who flew in the ATA were noted for their skill as they had to fly a variety of different planes. In the image Leska symbolises strength and confidence. In the photograph *ATS Officers Getting Changed in Camberley Surrey*, 1944 three trainee ATS officers are rapidly changing into their uniform after performing their drills. An intimacy between the photographer and the subjects is communicated in this image as they are ready to change in front of Miller. It's Miller's identity as a woman that contributes to this rapport between them. In the third photograph of *An Exhausted Nurse at the 44th Evacuation Hospital*, Normandy, France, 1944 taken a month after D-Day at Bricqueville Normandy, a nurse who is tired after her work is gazing lazily at something. The hospital is a temporary settlement; in this mobile hospital forty nurses treated about 4,500 patients between 5th of July and 4th August out of which only 50 died. These three images of women working in the warfront are strong displays of female agency and confidence. The subjects in these three photographs honestly display their emotions. They are not following any instructions and are appearing in the photographs as they are. Here there are no fissures in the power relation between the subjects and the photographers. Subjects as well as the photographer face the perils of the war, both of them display power and confidence.

Lee Miller had to go through deep trauma after representing the horrors of war in her photographs. "The traumatic events of war that Lee Miller experienced as a war correspondent and represented in her photojournalism can be understood as constituting an engagement with a particular form of "difficult knowledge" that takes place beyond the confines of the classroom in the uncanny time of learning where fragments of events and memories converge at moments in places when least expected."(Salvio 528) In the photograph of *A French Woman Accused of Collaborating with the Germans*, Rennes, France, 1944 is a woman who was being interrogated before being publicly shamed as a collaborator. The woman's hair is shaved off. Women accused of collaborating, particularly those who had been involved in relationship with Germans had their head shaved and in some cases their forehead was marked with swastikas. They were subjected to physical and verbal abuse during these public parades. Their shaved heads often became an identifying marker for the 'collaboratrice'. *The Burgermeister's Daughter in Town Hall* was captured in 1945 by Miller while she was travelling through Germany. This image is of the suicides of the city's Nazi vice-mayor and his family in Leipzig. In this picture Miller focuses on the dead bodies of the mayor's daughter and wife. She in her essay goes on to say about the daughter who had extraordinarily pretty teeth chose to die in her

starched nurse's uniform. Miller says about the role of women as perpetrators in Nazi Germany through these photographs. Rather than simply questioning them she also sympathizes with these subjects in the photographs. The disposition of both these women are photographed in a manner that deserves sympathy. Here the power relation between the subject and photographer is controlled by the emotion of sympathy.

The final photograph subjected to study in this paper is taken by David Scherman and Lee Miller appears as a model. Through the photograph *Lee Miller in Hitler's Bathtub*, Munich, Germany, 1945 Miller is expressing her protest against the atrocities of Hitler and fascism. In the picture the boots she had worn to visit the concentration camp is placed on the bathmat beside the tub. The dirt on the bathmat is the dirt of Dachau. In this image she has 'polluted' the bathroom of Adolf Hitler with the dust and dirt which bears the 'stink' of several thousand Jews whom he has killed and tortured. In the image Miller has placed herself in the middle of the photograph of Hitler and a sculptor. Thus this photograph becomes a perfect protest of a war photographer turned model who tried to trace the place of women in very masculine war.

Lee Miller through these photographs of her has documented the impact of war on culture and gender. In the course of development from a fashion photographer to a photojournalist she has used the techniques of surrealism to convey the politics of violence and resistance. Through this she has transformed the camera as an equipment of female gaze.

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