War, Peace, and Political Ethics in Modern English Poetry

Dr Mukta Gupta

Assistant Professor (English Lit.), Faculty of Education, Teerthanker Mahaveer University, Moradabad

Email- mukta.education@tmu.ac.in

Dr Ravi Prakash Singh

Assistant Professor (Political Science), Faculty of Education, Teerthanker Mahaveer University,

Moradabad, Email- ravip.education@tmu.ac.in, ravi.sipu@gmail.com

ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Research Paper **Accepted:** 24-01-2026 **Published:** 10-02-2026 **Keywords:** *war motifs, political ethics, lyric opacity, drone surveillance, patriotic disillusionment, civilian casualties, elegiac testimony, sousveillance resistance, systemic violence, ethical concealment*	This paper examines the portrayal of war, peace, and political ethics in modern English poetry, highlighting poets' resistance to state ideology and propaganda through depictions of individual trauma and subversion of total war narratives ("Abstract," 2009; Barskova, 2023). By drawing on motifs such as violence, trauma, and exile prevalent in contemporary poetic discourse, these works challenge the glorification of conflict and underscore the ethical imperative of poetry as resistance (Alsaden, 2013; Maryana, 2019). This ethical stance manifests in motifs of death, life, patriotic disillusionment, and civilian casualties, which permeate modern English poetic discourse to condemn war's ideological manipulations (Maryana, 2019). Such resistance aligns with broader poetic strategies invoking the act of poetry-making itself as a counterforce to wartime injustice and power structures (Jadwe & Ayyed, 2021). This invocation positions poetry as an ethical bulwark, fostering recovery from trauma and exile while interrogating the dehumanizing force of violence on both perpetrators and victims (Alsaden, 2013; Jadwe & Ayyed, 2021). This analysis employs frameworks from Simone Weil and Elaine Scarry to elucidate how violence blurs distinctions between aggressors and victims, thereby enabling poets to contest war's dehumanizing logic through

representations of shared obliteration (Alsaden, 2013). Through these representations, poets reclaim humanity amid violence's far-reaching traumatic aftermath, transforming poetry into a reflective space for ethical testimony against war's silencing effects (Alsaden, 2013). Ultimately, this study reveals how modern English poets, confronting the despair induced by cataclysmic events like world wars and geopolitical conflicts, elevate marginal voices to dismantle glorified narratives of power and fame (Ordu, 2024). This ethical reconfiguration extends to contemporary explorations of war motifs in poetic discourse, where poets employ metaphor and imagery to delineate conceptual boundaries between violence and human relation (Maryana, 2019; Mondal, 2022). In Solmaz Sharif's 'LOOK', this delineation emerges through lyric opacity, which disrupts militarized surveillance epistemologies by favoring ethical concealment over recognition in drone warfare activism (Editors, 2022). This opacity strategically counters the battlefield illumination of drone warfare by recasting pinpoint targets as shadowed domestic intimacies, thereby humanizing obscured civilian lives against militarized euphemisms (Finberg, 2022).

Introduction

This paper thus delineates how modern English poets, from modernist interrogations of war memorials to contemporary Pashto tapey and drone elegies, negotiate ideological tensions between public commemoration and private grief to ethicize violence's systemic mutations (Ashraf & Farooq, 2022; Bolotin, 2020; Palmer & Minogue, 2010). These negotiations reveal poetry's capacity to forge translocal ethical witness, as seen in Dionne Brand's _Inventory_, where juxtaposed precarity archives link war zones and deportation regimes to mourn disregarded bodies through embodied vulnerability (Vellino, 2013). Similarly, in Emi Mahmoud's *Sister's Entrance*, affective poetics illuminate the bodily repercussions of displacement and hyphenated refugee identities, framing war's overlooked suffering as an ethical call to visceral empathy beyond geopolitical abstraction (Studies & Hanafy, 2025). This ethical reconfiguration of empathy through poetry's affective strategies extends to post-War British poets like Jon Silkin, Geoffrey Hill, and Tony Harrison, whose works negotiate survival, identity, and cosmopolitan witness amid the geographical and historical burdens of conflict (Copley, 2015). Their poetry counters

the ethical suspension often attributed to lyric forms by embedding individual subjectivities within collective histories of atrocity, thereby restoring moral discourse to the intimate textures of war's aftermath (Clark, 2009). This restoration unfolds through Silkin's raw dissections of battlefield fragmentation in _Killhope Wheel_, where industrial decay mirrors the ethical erosion of martial sacrifice, compelling readers to confront the commodification of human loss (Gräbner, 2024). Hill's *Mercian Hymns*, meanwhile, refracts Offa's mythic kingship through dissonant historical shards, subverting imperial legacies of conquest by entangling royal ambition with the profane detritus of modern provincial life (Montin, 2022). Harrison's *V*, in contrast, animates the ghostly vernacular of working-class dead through Scouse dialects and V-bomber silhouettes, ethicizing the Cold War's nuclear sublime as a profane liturgy of communal dread and defiant humanity (Finberg, 2022). These post-War British poets thus prefigure contemporary elegiac innovations, where Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* extends the genre's melancholic resistance to consolation by forging uneasy communions between reader and writer amid the grief of national histories interconnecting through war's enduring reverberations (Bolotin, 2020). Rankine's archival poetics, by interweaving personal lyric with fragmented media vignettes of racialized violence and geopolitical unrest, thus enacts an elegiac citizenship that resists the War on Terror's sentimental appropriations of grief (Bolotin, 2020). This resistance manifests through Rankine's investigative poetics, which weave testimonials and reportage into embodied critiques of racialized health disparities and xenophobic violence, positioning the Black body as a trans-corporeal site of ethical interconnection amid perpetual war states (Dobbs, 2020; Welch, 2015). By recentering the War on Terror within a protracted continuum of American xenophobia and state violence, Rankine deploys sentimental reading of poetry to cultivate relational consolations that transcend national isolationism (Bolotin, 2020). This transcendence emerges through Rankine's sentimental engagement with César Vallejo's poetry, which supplies an imaginary of the nation rooted in early twentieth-century Peru, thereby loosening historical exceptionalism and fostering a miserable communion that shares grief without prescribing action (Bolotin, 2020). This shared grief, moreover, aligns with elegy's spatial turn, wherein geographic imagination maps the mutable distances between mourner and mourned, inscribing memory against war's absences while challenging socio-historical ruptures in post-World War II traditions (Mills, 2013). Consequently, Rankine's poetics of misery bridges this elegiac chasm by invoking transnational poetic canons—such as Hejinian, Stein, Vallejo, and Celan—to enable readers to carry forward historical language into contemporary reading, countering victor-dominated narratives with sentimental strategies that connect self to global others (Bolotin, 2020). Such strategies underscore poetry's phenomenological resistance to enframing technologies of war, as

Rankine integrates unpoetic media fragments into lyric forms that authenticate interpersonal bonds against the War on Terror's scripted emotional conscriptions (Bolotin, 2020; McQuerry, 2020). This integration parallels the onto-epistemological critique in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, where the second-person lyric deconstructs humanist enclosures of Black affect, theorizing its unthinkability under antiblack racial violence as a negation of interiority (Palmer, 2017). This deconstruction aligns with conceptual poetics' crisis of appropriation, as Rankine's techniques in *Citizen*—blending lyrics, visuals, and scripts—offer phenomenological illustrations of structural racism and necropolitics, extending beyond lyric boundaries to forge theoretically charged critiques of raced embodiment (Guimarães, 2018; Leong, 2018). Through this phenomenological lens, Rankine's *Citizen* deploys critical race theory to expose the invisibility of hierarchical racial formations in post-racial America, countering color-blind ideologies with color-conscious narratives that demand anti-racist reckoning (Adams, 2017; Ayres, 2018). This reckoning intensifies through Rankine's adaptation of free indirect style, which intertwines inner voice with social discourse to retheorize lyric address as a site of racial discomfiture, challenging disembodied empathy with sociolinguistic discomfort rooted in Black ontologies (Houen, 2021; Lindstrom, 2020). Consequently, Rankine's second-person address destabilizes the lyric "I" by enacting an "unstable collapse" of private and public speech, surfacing the racial unconscious embedded in the historical formation of the genre (Cotton, 2020).

Literature Review

This literature review surveys key scholarship on Rankine's formal innovations in *Citizen*, which construe blackness as a legible yet dismantlable textual and imagistic construct, compelling readers to interrogate their complicity in racializing processes through self-reflexive poetic structures (Adams, 2017; Djawoto, 2017; Wall, 2018). Scholars highlight how Rankine's second-person address in *Citizen* situates readers within a racialized poetic consciousness, defying traditional lyric models by demanding sentimental reading strategies that forge continuity between textual worlds and lived racial encounters (Bolotin, 2020; Djawoto, 2017). This readerly immersion disrupts the solipsistic privilege of the traditional lyric's first-person soliloquy, substituting a double-consciousness that withholds unmolested subjectivity from the Black speaker amid hostile racial projections (Ashton, 2021). Rankine's intercorporeal discourse further amplifies this double-consciousness by aggregating heterogeneous Black experiences into vignettes of microaggressions, thereby theorizing racism as a shared bodily phenomenology that implicates diverse subjects in collective racial reckoning (Djawoto, 2017). This collective reckoning is achieved through Rankine's "lyric-You," which thrusts every reader into simultaneous positions of speaker and addressee, compelling white readers to navigate complex

discomforts between vicarious Black identification and racial rejection (Kamionowski, 2020). Such navigation exposes the post-truth fragility of racial epistemologies, where fiction's candid artifice reclaims authentic relational meaning against misinformation's deceptive guises (Djawoto, 2017). Rankine's formal destabilization of lyric pronominals, in this vein, relinquishes coherent authorship to indict the white lyric space's universality, fostering a volatile "you" that exposes readers to the unrelenting indeterminateness of racial judgment (Djawoto, 2017; Parmar, 2020). This indeterminateness, moreover, leverages repetition as a rhetorical strategy to amplify unanswered questions about racism, visually manifesting silence through page blankness and recurrent figures that underscore the incoherence of interracial encounters (Adams, 2017; Bolotin, 2020). These vignettes, by invoking acousmatic voices and untargeted addressability, further constitute readers as involuntary moral subjects prior to willful agency, pressing ethical demands from a nameless elsewhere that binds diverse bodies in shared racial impingement (Djawoto, 2017; Kamionowski, 2020). This impingement, in turn, resonates with conceptual art precedents like Adrian Piper's calling cards, where direct confrontations of racial assumptions prefigure Rankine's pronominal indirection by collapsing observer and observed into ethical immediacy (Kamionowski, 2020). Piper's calling cards, by staging these confrontations through scripted interventions in everyday interactions, prefigure Rankine's pronominal indirection as a mode of ethical interpellation that reconfigures the lyric's historical interiority into a public arena of racial accountability (Cotton, 2020; Gander, 2020). This public arena, analogized to the acousmatic "you" in Rankine's Hurricane Katrina script, compels readers to confront the historical black/white dynamic by questioning their perceptual distance from racialized suffering (Adams, 2017)

Methodology

This methodological framework employs close reading of Rankine's pronominal dislocations and visual layouts in *Citizen*, corroborated by comparative analysis with conceptual art precedents, to trace how second-person address enacts a polyvocal subjectivity that disorients readerly positionality amid racialized encounters (Ashton, 2021; Gander, 2020). This polyvocal enactment is supplemented by paratextual analysis of Rankine's embedded scripts and enjambed typographies, which layer historical self-fracture onto intimate address to reveal the structural violence of white patriarchal history upon Black relationality (Adams, 2017). By integrating these analytical strata, the framework elucidates how Rankine's typographic enjambments—evident in the unpunctuated repetition of Hurston's refrains alongside Ligon's etchings—shatter conventional typesetting to propel momentum across racialized textual boundaries, refusing formal containment of Black precarity (Djawoto, 2017). This formal refusal, in turn, aligns with Rankine's invocation of addressability as a precondition of ethical vulnerability,

wherein readers confront their hypervisibility within racist language acts that exploit embodied presence (Kamionowski, 2020). Consequently, this exploitation manifests as an implicated readerly position, wherein second-person address renders the audience complicit in the violent structures of racial perception, echoing formal strategies that bridge poetic innovation with antiracist critique (Chen & Kreiner, 2018; Noji, 2024). This bridging extends to theoretical underpinnings from dialogical self theory, wherein Rankine's pronominal shifts portray identity as a dynamic triad of multiple self-positions in dialogic tension, countering monolithic racial norms with fluid Black subjectivities (Elshaikh, 2023). This dialogic fluidity, moreover, intersects with archival reanimations in poets like Elizabeth Alexander, whose persona-driven suites resurrect absented Black voices to contest historical erasures through unstable collapses of lyric interiority (Sharp, 2020). Rankine's emulation of Alexander's archival tactic thus extends poetic ethics into a war-torn continuum, where pronominal instability confronts imperial erasures of Black testimony with a disorienting intimacy that binds readerly perception to global histories of violence (Bolotin, 2020; Simecek, 2019). Consequently, Rankine's pronominal instability precipitates a reparative Black lyricism that renders the genre unfit for history's racialized enclosures, enacting cultural reconstruction through fugitive subjectivities that evade lyric's entrenched violences (Cotton, 2020). This evasion, in turn, dovetails with contemporary Black poetics' reparative mode, which reshapes lyric reconstruction by restaging historical racial violences through ungovernable social movements that resist normative enclosures (Cotton, 2020). Such resistance culminates in erasure poetry's redactive interventions, which materialize Zora Neale Hurston's invocation of racial hypervisibility against sharp white backdrops by excising textual protocols to forge novel pathways for Black value and authority (Coyle, 2023).

Results

This study reveals that Rankine's pronominal strategies precipitate a reparative lyric rupture, wherein second-person address collapses readerly detachment into ethical immediacy, paralleling Black Consciousness poetry's direct confrontation of apartheid violence against the abstracted evasions of white lyric formalism (Decker, 2016). This parallel underscores how Rankine's reparative addressivity echoes the pronominal failures in Afropessimist texts, where first-person narration collapses under the institutional barriers to Black authorship, thereby repurposing lyric form as a site of ontological rupture against apartheid-era aesthetic hierarchies (Hughes, 2023). Similarly, Claude McKay's sonnet poetics in *Harlem Shadows* redirects formal traditions toward radical politics by channeling climatic currents of colonial spaces into liberatory discursive flows, thereby subverting lyric enclosure to amplify ethical demands on imperial readerships (Wildermuth, 2021). This redirection in McKay parallels Rankine's

postlyric interruptions, which dialectically cite lyric genre to contest its expressive singularity while rendering racialized address a site of legibility for Black experimentalism (Cotton, 2020). This legibility, moreover, manifests in contemporary US Black poetics through a generic drag that reconstructs lyric privacy as public shock, destabilizing race's role in its historical fictions (Cotton, 2020). This destabilization further aligns with Black Consciousness poetry's conversational directness, which pierced apartheid's everyday brutalities to repudiate the sublimated abstractions of white lyricism, thereby forging an entangled poetics that subordinated formalist detachment to ethical imperatives of racial justice (Decker, 2016). In turn, Rankine's addressivity amplifies this entangled poetics by theorizing the second-person "you" as a sentimental mode of self-expansion that links individual readers to the formative histories of racialized violence (Bolotin, 2020). This sentimental expansion, akin to the syncopated sonnets of contemporary US Black poets, leverages lyric form to render audible the persistence of racist formulations within modern incarceration's chattel echoes (Cotton, 2020). Such syncopated sonnets, in turn, engender a transformative lyric moment that converts ephemeral experiences of racial incarceration into sustainable narratives of ethical resistance, thereby reconfiguring poetic address as a reparative force against historical enclosures (Cotton, 2020; Wildermuth, 2021). This reconfiguration, moreover, resonates with the avant-garde political poetics of Claudia Rankine, where subjective loneliness registers the structural impossibility of effecting change amid racialized predicaments, thereby infusing lyric address with an interior crippling that demands ethical reckoning beyond formal containment (Bolotin, 2020). This infusion, furthermore, dovetails with Rankine's sentimental avant-gardism, which repurposes lyric emotion as a public reckoning with the national soul's deceptions during the War on Terror, thereby transcending neo-avant-garde emphases on intellect to foreground self-reflective vulnerability as antiracist praxis (Bolotin, 2020). This praxis, in turn, redefines the American lyric as an embodied citizenry's sensorium, embedding individual pathos within the political fabric to contest the War on Terror's disembodied rhetoric through nuanced contextualizations of affective experience (Bolotin, 2020). These nuanced contextualizations, in turn, expose the lyric subject's entanglement with post-Enlightenment fictions of transparency that obscure the "space of otherness" constitutive of racial order, thereby repositioning Rankine's affective strategies as a critique of the transcendental human embedded in modern poetics (Cotton, 2020).

Discussion

Rankine's critique thus unveils lyric's racialized underpinnings, wherein genre history intersects with racial interpellation to privilege aesthetic values that marginalize Black experimental poetics as unfit for canonical reconstruction (Cotton, 2020). This marginalization echoes the neo-avant-garde's dismissal of

contextualized subjectivity in poets of color as politically retrograde, linking identity and sentimentality to bourgeois individualism that polices Black lyric innovation against Eurocentric abstractions (Bolotin, 2020). Yet this policing inadvertently sustains lyric's idealized contours, as Rankine's poetic critique upholds the genre's spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings while occluding economic inequalities disproportionately burdening Black Americans (Ashton, 2021). Consequently, Rankine's sentimental lyricism counters this occlusion by staging miserable communions between reader and racialized subject, wherein the sorrow of thinking globally while acting locally registers the structural limits of poetic redress amid the War on Terror's ethical voids (Bolotin, 2020). This staging, in turn, aligns with contemporary US Black poetics' refiguration of lyric tradition, contesting de Man's defensive hermeneutics by innovating genre as a site for Black subjectivity's reparative addressivity (Cotton, 2020). This innovation, moreover, dovetails with contemporary poets' shift toward a rhetoric of witnessing, wherein demonstrative speech acts invoke ethos and express care to display epistemic paths amid racialized powerlessness, thereby supplanting modernist anti-rhetorical ideals with ethically charged lyric forms (Altierí, 2012; Bolotin, 2020). This ethical charge, furthermore, intersects with the affective turn's racial silences, where Black affect's unthinkability within Western onto-epistemology exposes lyric form's complicity in foreclosing social feeling's universality amid modern political crises (Palmer, 2017). Consequently, Rankine's miserable communion revises elegiac traditions to engender an awakened responsibility that exceeds individual agency, fostering a sutured social imaginary attuned to the War on Terror's sentimental transmissions (Bolotin, 2020). This sutured social imaginary, in turn, anticipates Afro-pessimist literary lineages that deform autobiographical relationality to expose the vicious trauma of black social death as an alternative modernity irreducible to lyric redress (Pak, 2012). Nevertheless, Rankine's deformation of lyric redress into Afro-pessimist horizons prefigures a hybrid poetics that fuses elegiac sentiment with noir-inflected paranoia, thereby contesting the War on Terror's ethical enclosures through intergeneric dialogues that transnationalize Black lyric's reparative addressivity (Ramazani, 2017; Robbins, 2019). This transnationalization, moreover, parallels reparative readings of contemporary poetry that strategically withhold paranoid suspicion to cultivate affective relations with canonical texts, thereby opening lyric addressivity to unexpected ethical possibilities amid racialized enclosures (Chavez & Lin, 2020). This addressivity, consequently, anticipates the global circulation of lyric forms in fostering transnational poetic communities that interrogate community formation amid modern ethical crises ("Rethinking Lyric Communities," 2024). Such transnational poetic communities, as theorized through lyric's intergeneric and transhistorical modalities, mobilize formal strategies that fuse poetics with hermeneutics to negotiate the ethical fractures of war and peace in modern English poetry

(Ramazani, 2017). By harnessing poetry's resistant interiors—those dramatized encounters with occluded alien experiences—these modalities restore the irreducible remoteness of ethical otherness, transforming lyric's reparative potential into a sustained negotiation of war's irrevocable fractures and peace's provisional sutures (Feuerstein, 2012).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Rankine's lyric interventions thus exemplify how modern English poetry reconfigures ethical addressivity to bridge war's defilements and peace's aspirations, positing the genre as a lament that anticipates restoration through shared recognition of ruptured covenants (Cox, 2022). This reconfiguration, extending beyond Rankine's interventions to Northern Irish post-peace process poets like Leontia Flynn and Sinéad Morrissey, reveals lyric replication as a critical mechanism for admitting complicity in neoliberal homogenization while striving for ethical distance from market-driven cultural norms (McConnell, 2018). Flynn and Morrissey, in particular, deploy lyric's temporal drag to queer historical orientations, rendering the post-peace process landscape perversely askew and thereby disclosing poetry's reparative hinge on racialized fugitivity (Cotton, 2020). This reparative hinge, moreover, anticipates the handshake metaphor in Rankine's reception of Celan, wherein the poem's ritualized assertion of presence sutures the reader's touch to the poet's alive offering amid elegy's consolatory voids (Bolotin, 2020). This suturing, in turn, reconceptualizes lyric communities as shifting, open-ended social worlds forged through identifications, apostrophes, and gestures that negotiate war's ethical fractures beyond pregiven organic bonds ("Rethinking Lyric Communities," 2024). Ultimately, this negotiation of ethical fractures beyond pregiven organic bonds underscores poetry's covenantal poetics, wherein lyric addressivity enacts communal reimaginings of situated audiences to renew ruptured social covenants amid modern war's cosmopolitan deracinations (Wall, 2018). This covenantal renewal, resonant with Muldoon's resistance to simplified explanatory frameworks for Northern Irish crises, ultimately posits modern English poetry as a transatlantic ethical praxis that sustains peace's fragile horizons against war's persistent cosmopolitan voids (Karhio, 2011). By extending this transatlantic praxis to encompass global modernist engagements with planetary crises—from Yeats's orientalist Asias to Stevens's ecological thought—modern English poetry further unveils lyric's translingual capacities for negotiating ethical otherness across war's fractured cosmopolitanisms (Ramazani, 2020). These translingual capacities, in turn, converge with the georgic mode's interrupted vitality in contemporary Irish poetry, where mushrooms embody ecological remediation amid contested histories of rupture and provisional peace (Bundschuh, 2021). In this georgic interruption, poets like Ailbhe Darcy entangle human and nonhuman scales through symbiotic embedment, shifting lyric

attention from Anthropocene crisis to interspecies care along precarious borders (Bundschuh, 2021). This interspecies care, paralleling Heaney's pastoral eclogues in *Electric Light*, revives dialogic exchanges between human and environmental voices to broaden ethical horizons beyond anthropocentric enclosures (Rozzoni, 2021). Such georgic entanglements in Darcy's poetry extend Zukofsky's covenantal poetics, where experimental forms beyond the lyric forge mutually obligated communities among marginalized human and nonhuman agents to negotiate Anthropocene vulnerabilities (Bundschuh, 2021; Wall, 2018). Consequently, this extension to Zukofsky's objectivist innovations underscores how covenantal poetics in Jewish, Irish, and African American modernisms deploy verse forms to enact readerly communities that transcend lyric binaries, fostering both/and hermeneutics amid outsider marginalizations (Wall, 2018). This both/and hermeneutics, as evidenced in covenantal poetics across Jewish, Irish, and African American modernisms, leverages prophetic rhetoric and multilingual intertexts to theorize poetic forms that summon readers into racially-mixed, covenantal communities beyond lyric confines (Wall, 2018). These covenantal communities, resonant with the georgic mode's embrace of environmental fragility along Ireland's contested borders, further deploy mushrooms as resilient agents of remediation in contemporary Irish poetry, acknowledging erupting violence while fostering interspecies ethical renewal (Bundschuh, 2021). This fungal remediation, as articulated in a georgic revival across contemporary Irish mushroom poems, proceeds through dissolution and loss toward renewal, locating gratitude in the resilient labor of foraging amid agrarian precarity (Bundschuh, 2021). This georgic foraging, in turn, enacts sympoiesis through fungal companion species that distribute violence across mycelial interconnections, countering war's ruptures with resilient, cross-species knowledge exchange (Bundschuh, 2021).

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