ANNA AKHMATOVA AS AN ELEGIAC POET: A STUDY OF REQUIEM AS AN ELEGY IN RELATION TO THE NORTHERN ELEGIES

ABSTRACT

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2008

Chapter I: Introduction: The Making and Development of Requiem

Anna Andreevna Gorenko, or more popularly, Anna Akhmatova, was born on 23 June 1888 in Kiev, Russia. [1] Harnessing her poetic genius at the early age of eleven, she later adopted I. Annensky and then N. Gumilev [2] as her mentors. Her emotional affinity with Gumilev culminated in their marriage in 1910. Anna Andreevna Gorenko wrote under the pen name of Anna Akhmatova since "her middle-class father had asked her not to dishonour their family name with literary pursuits". [3] She published her first volume of verse, Vecher (Evening) in 1912. Some of her other important works include Chetki (Rosary, 1914), Belaya Staya (White Flock, 1917), Poema Bez Groya; Triptykh (Poem Without a Hero, 1960), Rekviem (Requiem, 1964) and the Northern Elegies, published posthumously in 1985.

The publication of her second book of verse Chetki catapulted her into a prominent literary figure in Russia. Her poems were widely read and soon the Akhmatova "craze" was started, with young lovers quoting extensively from her love poems in their love letters. [4]

Experiences of a darker shade, however, diversifies her themes and transforms her into a more mature poetic voice as manifested in her later poems. These experiences firstly took the shape of her divorce

with Gumilev in 1918 and her subsequent marriage to Vladimir Shileiko whom she also left in 1921. Moreover, the 1917 Revolution [5] and the events thereafter compounded her problems and changed her poetry forever. In 1921 her first husband Nikolai Gumilev was seized on the charge of counter-revolutionary conspiracy and was executed. In 1935 her only son, born of Gumilev, was arrested and was subsequently exiled to fourteen years in a Siberian prison, an incident which led to the composition of the now famous Requiem. In 1946, Akhmatova was denounced by Andrey Zhadanov and was expelled from the Union of Soviet Writers. It was only after the death of Stalin in 1953 that she was readmitted into the Union. The years that followed brought greater world recognition for Akhmatova. In 1964 she won the Etna-Taormina International Poetry Prize and in 1965 she received an honorary doctorate degree from Oxford University. Akhmatova continued to write and translate late into her life. She died after a long illness on 5 March 1966 in Komarovo, near Leningrad where she had lived since the early sixties.

It was the arrest of her son, Lev Gumilev, along with thousands others, which initially inspired Akhmatova to compose the group of melancholy poems that were later to be strung together in Requiem. Many of those imprisoned along with Gumilev were peasants, whose enormous population opposed the Government's move to "forcibly

collectivize agriculture". [6] This resulted in widespread famine, in which millions starved and died. When the purges of Stalin against such resistance started in the early 1930s, millions more were arrested, tortured, isolated and neglected in prison cells for long periods of time, and finally taken away to work in concentration camps in Siberia or executed.

The situation was no less bad for the intellectual class, which also came under the brunt of the purges. Many writers and artists were arrested, executed or disgraced and banned from producing any work of art, which may in any way seem detrimental to the state. As such much of the poetic dissent of the time existed mainly in oral form and according to Clare Cavanagh, a prominent critic of Russian Literature, much of it existed only in pieces of paper hidden or hurriedly memorised. A prime example of this type of poetry is Akhmatova's Requiem, a powerful statement of truth, a poem which had gathered strength from a verbal documentation of the grief and suffering of a nation.

As a poem that grew out of whispers, this is how Requiem began according to Akhmatova herself. As she was standing shivering in the cold outside the prison gates to await news of her son's sentencing, a woman standing behind her with lips "blue and cold" emerged from among the file of faceless figures and putting her cold lips close to

Akhmatova's ears whispered " — And could you describe this?" to which Akhmatova replied "I can". The poem being short she memorised and whispered it to some of her very close and trusted friends requesting them to memorise it in turn in an attempt to make sure that the poem was never forgotten. She did the same with the other poems in the cycle and composed individual verses, memorised them and passed them on.

The censorship on the publication of her poetry from 1924 to 1940 discouraged many of the publishers from publishing her works. This way, Requiem, which was verbally composed to a large extent before 1940, was never published until 1963. The major cycle of ten poems in Requiem was composed on different dates between 1935 and 1940 while the three introductions, "By Way of a Preface" was composed in 1957, "Dedication" in 1940, and "Prelude" was undated. The last poem to be composed was the epigraph, a quatrain, written in 1961.

Largely because of its history and development, the poem has been generally described as a complex cycle of fifteen poems and one prose paragraph consisting of an epigraph, three introductions and ten poems organized in chronological order. The epigraph is a kind of flashback where Akhmatova makes it clear that she consciously willed to stay with her people during the terrible years of the Stalin purges, as

many others fled the country. The three introductions, set the tone of the poem as well as encapsulates the terror and "torpor common to us all" ("By Way of a Preface") at the height of the Stalin purges, the horrific conditions of loss and grief, the state of lifelessness that had numbed the lips of many and also paint the picture of a Russia under the throes of imprisonments, torture and execution so that even the dead had seemed to be better off and "were glad of release". The ten central poems document the arrest, the sentencing and the periods of intense "grief, denial, incomprehension, and withdrawal" [7] experienced by the poet as she awaits her son's uncertain fate. A two-part 'Epilogue' closes the cycle, reflecting Akhmatova's reaction to the destructive nature of the Terror of the Stalinist regime and a wish to expose that Terror by devising a "verbal strategy of [defence and] remembrance". [8]

Although Akhmatova composed the fifteen poems of Requiem on different dates, she has been able to organise them into 'thematic cycles' and marks the end with a short rule (——) to indicate the completion of the cycle. The theme of grief runs strongly across the entire poem, which can be seen on two levels. Firstly, the theme is seen in the documentation of Akhmatova's suffering – the grief in the loss of her husband and peers, the repeated imprisonments and subsequent exile of her son and her own suffering and grief while waiting

anxiously for word of her imprisoned son. Secondly, Requiem does not only remain a poem of personal anguish, but Akhmatova also universalises her theme as seen in "By Way of a Preface" when she agrees to speak for the people of Russia, especially the women who suffered along with her, with a firm "I can". In this way the poem develops into "a lament for the people of Russia [and] its scale is simultaneously enormous and intimate" [9] so much so that the poem has been described by critics such as Sharon M. Bailey as an "elegy for Russia".[10]

It is with the description of the poem as an elegy that one comes face to face with the problem that is at the centre of any serious evaluation of Requiem as a poem. This is also the problem that has be taken up by this study, for the most obvious question that presents itself is whether Requiem is an elegy at all. In attempting to answer such questions and to discover its true character, this study examines the poem from the point of view of the elegiac tradition. It also compares the poem's treatment with that of Akhmatova's handling of a group of poems broadly categorised as the Northern Elegies, which according to L. G. Frizman, a prominent critic of Akhmatova's poetry, are not formal elegies but are merely elegiac in character. In effect, the Northern Elegies are used as a tool to study the elegiac nature of Requiem.

Chapter II: The Elegy, Its Definitions, Conventions and Modern Tendencies

In the previous chapter a reference has been made to Sharon M. Bailey's statement, which refers to Requiem as an "elegy for Russia". But before any in depth analysis can be made on the nature of the poem, this chapter discusses the Elegy — its definitions, conventions, and modern tendencies — and also a few samples of the different types of elegies to serve as an introductory discussion leading to the next chapter, which proposes to critically analyse Requiem as an elegy with the help of genre criticism.

According to critics of the genre, "There are two possible definitions of the elegy...: one in its traditional sense and the other in its broader, unconventional sense". [11] In the traditional sense of the term, the elegy refers to "an elaborately formal lyric poem lamenting the death of a friend or public figure. It is characterised by a powerful intertwining of emotion and rhetoric, of loss and figuration, and above all by the movement from mourning to consolation". It also employs a set of conventions introduced by Greek and Sicilian poets and developed at the hands of elegists, from Theocritus to Spenser and Milton. They may be listed as under:

> the representation of the dead friend as a shepherd to be mourned by the natural world, or pastoral contextualisation

> with its apostrophe and pathetic fallacy; the myth of the vegetation deity; the use of repetitions and refrains; the reiterated questioning and the outbreak of vengeful anger or denunciation; the procession of mourners; the passage from grief to consolation and the traditional images of resurrection, transfiguration, stellification and deification. Additional conventions can also be seen in the use of the images of flowers and light, the eclogic division within or between mourning voices, the question of contests, rewards, and inheritance, and the unusual degree of self-consciousness regarding the actual performance of mourning. (KSN p. 2)

A few samples of the conventional pastoral elegy are "Lament for Bion" attributed to Moschus, Bion's "Lament for Adonis" and Theocritus' "First Idyll". In England among the major ones are Spenser's "Thc Shepheardes Calender", John Donne's "Elegies", Milton's "Lycidas", P. B. Shelley's "Adonais", and Lord Alfred Tennyson's "In Memoriam".

In the unconventional sense, the elegy has broadened its scope and "may refer to a poem of serious reflection on a solemn subject or the tragic aspects of life". Bailey elaborates that, "while an elegy may be (and usually is) occasioned by death, it is more accurately defined as a poem about loss". [12] Hence, it may be noted that the unconventional elegy has shifted its focus away from death, towards loss and melancholy.

But while the unconventional elegy still makes use of various conventions of the traditional elegy it does not always adhere to them entirely. Such deviation from the traditional conventions is seen in the choice of themes, which these poets employ. For instance, Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" mourns the passing away of the forefathers into obscurity and the possible early death of the poet himself. Further, the unconventional elegy is also unresolved in the act of mourning, which is seen in their resentful anger against the living. Even their consolations, although not anti-consolatory, are inconclusive and insufficient. A few examples of the unconventional elegy as identified by critics like M. H. Abrams are, Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard", Mathew Arnold's "Memorial Verses" and "Scholar-Gipsy", and Maria Rainer Rilke's Duino Elegies.

The movement of the unconventional elegy away from its predecessor has broadened the scope for further modifications, which in turn constitute the modern tendencies that Jahan Ramazani, an authority on the modern elegy, talks about in his book, Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney.[13] In this book, Ramazani defines the scope of the modern elegy that it "permeates a wide range of poems about war, love, race gender, meditation, the self, the family, and the poet". Moreover, the modern elegy incorporates in

its work of mourning, "more anger and scepticism, more conflict and anxiety than ever before". As a result, they attack the dead and the self, their work and tradition and they discard such traditional ideas of consolation as rebirth of the dead in nature, in God, or in poetry itself. In doing so, the modern elegy indicates that there is no consolatory formula laid out for the mourner but instead an immersion in his own grief.

Thus it has been seen that the elegy as a genre has not remained static but has evolved with the times, has broadened its range and even changed the contours of its movement, which had traditionally used to progress from praise, to lament and consolation. These evolutions should prove useful in examining Requiem as an elegy.

Chapter III: Requiem and the Elegiac Mode

This chapter makes use of the definitions and conventions listed in the preceding chapter to study the nature of Requiem as a poem of mourning with a view to establishing it as an elegy. In the process the chapter also examines how the definitions and conventions are followed or modified.

From the description of the poem given in the first chapter, it is seen that Requiem is occasioned by the arrest of the son, along with thousands others and therefore, at first glance the poem seems to have little in common with an elegy for it mourns not the death but the arrest of the son. However, a brief look at the events will shed some more light on the question above as well as on the significance of the arrests during the Stalinist reign of terror. Deliberating on the implication of the word 'arrest', Bailey explains that "for a vast number of victims of the Terror, arrest resulted in death, whether immediately by execution or slowly in Siberia so that it might be assumed that the one leads directly to the other".[14] Further, in examining the text, it can be seen that references to death are indeed present throughout the cycle of poems. For example, in "Prelude" the poem suggests the presence of death in the images of

> Stars of death stood above us, and Russia,
> In her innocence, twisted in pain
> Under blood-spattered boots.

The "Stars" here hang as ominous signs of impending death. A reference to death is also made in poem 1 with the help of an allusion to the wives of the Streltsy[15] who wail the death of their husbands as now Akhmatova wails for her son: "Like the wives of the Streltsy, now I come / To wail under the Kremlin's gaunt towers". But death does not remain only a possibility as a result of arrest. The horrific living

conditions of the times are such that even life for the people, especially for the thousands of women who have lost either their sons or husbands, has acquired the horribleness of death. This has reduced the women sufferers to the status of a "shadow in the gloom" (Poem 2) and has become so unbearable that in contrast to it, actual physical death is considered desirable.'

But although death is represented as a recurrent theme against which the experiences of the mother and the arrest of her son are reflected, it is only in examining Requiem in the light of the definition of the unconventional elegy, which is a poem "of serious reflection on a solemn subject or the tragic aspects of life...having a deep pervasive tone of melancholy reflection on life's transience and its sorrows", [16] that its nature as an elegy becomes clearer. As it will be illustrated in this chapter, Requiem is a poem of serious reflection on the tragic aspects of life involving the several arrests of her son, the death of her poet friends and the mass arrests and executions during the purges of Stalin. Thus, "despite the lack of funeral or eulogistic elements", [17] the sense of loss and despair, which is not merely personal but universal, is strongly felt in the poem.

The view of Requiem as an elegy, especially in the unconventional sense, becomes even more clearly defined when the use of elegiac conventions, how they have been accommodated or

modified, in the poem is examined. In undertaking this examination, it is seen that Requiem employs many of the traditional elegiac conventions, conforming to some while modifying others in various and unique ways. Among the various conventions of an elegy, the ones used in Requiem are the convention of the pathetic fallacy, the display of anger and rage, the convention of questioning, the convention of the thematic universality of grief, the division of the mourning voices, and the movement from grief and mourning to consolation and remembrance.

The convention of the pathetic fallacy can be understood as the creation of a fiction where man is seen to control nature and its changes as nature is made to mourn and partake in his grief. In other words the withering of nature is not the cause of man's grief, rather nature becomes the externalisation of his sorrow. In Requiem a direct and clear example of this is seen in the first two lines of "Dedication": "Mountains bow beneath that boundless sorrow, / And the mighty river stops its flow". However, it is not only nature that is made to mourn but in a novel use of the convention, even the man-made city and the nation as a whole is made to participate in grief as if to emphasise the fact that the loss experienced is not natural but man-made.

The intense sorrow felt by the poet and the absence of the means of redress leads her to display anger and rage against death, life and the

government. In her rage against the anguish and torment of life, she calls on death. But death does not come and therefore, she nurtures anger towards death too: "You'll come in any case — then why not right away?" ("To Death"). The poet also lashes out at the Stalinist regime for the atrocities it has committed on the people of Russia.

Usually the display of anger is followed by the convention of questioning so as to "set free the energy locked in grief and rage and to organize its movement in the form of a question that is not merely an expression of ignorance but a voicing of protest". [18] In Requiem the poet uses the convention to express her longing to know about the fate of her "friends" and those of the imprisoned: "Where are now the friends of my misfortune, / Those that shared my own two years of hell?" ("Dedication"). Her will to communicate and share the burden of grief with others, thus saves her from being overwhelmed by it. The poet's longing to revive the connection with her fellow sufferers can also be seen as an indirect protest against the dehumanising acts of the Soviet regime to destroy any form of social contact.

Another important convention of the elegy used in Requiem is the thematic universality to which the elegy should appeal. The poem advances towards this end in a number of ways. Firstly, the poet invites the reader to place himself/herself within the framework of the poem and to learn about the atrocities and grief experienced by the suffering

women, thus, enabling the reader to understand that the grief is not that of the poet alone but of an entire nation. This in turn appeals to the readers' involvement in the universal sentiment of grief. Secondly, apart from reaching out to her readers and inviting them to witness her grief, Akhmatova makes it very clear right from the beginning of the poem, that is, in "By Way of a Preface", that she speaks on behalf of the thousands of other women who shared the experiences of the poet but were unable to communicate on their own. By speaking for the people she transforms her personal experience of grief into a national and cultural outpouring of sorrow and despair: "We know nothing, we, together facing / Still the sickening clank of keys" ("Dedication"). Thirdly, Akhmatova also makes references to her husband's death, the death of Nikolai Punin and that of Osip Mandelstam. This points to the fact that even in her most intimate experiences of losing both husband and son, she is not free from associating her losses with the tragedy befallen other close associates.

In Requiem the convention of the division of the mourning voices is in the form of a division within the poet herself and is formulated through two voices — that of the poet's and of the other women's. This not only helps in universalising the theme of grief in the poem but is also an attempt to transfer the tragedy by alluding it to another person's suffering. In doing so, the poet suppresses her grief

and even tries to deny the existence of tragedy completely. This can also be seen as an act of confrontation of the tragedy, which is an important aspect in the movement of the elegy from grief to consolation.

The movement of the elegy from grief to consolation can be considered as a more enduring purpose of all elegies. However, in Requiem, the major portion of the cycle reveals a strong activity of mourning and expression of sorrow. In fact, there is no sign of movement from sorrow to consolation in the ten central poems as the poet only passes through varying degrees of grief. Therese A. Rando [19] observes that the poet in Requiem goes through the three stages of grief — avoidance, confrontation and reestablishment — twice over, "once after the arrest, portrayed in Poem I, and the second time after the sentencing in poem VII". These three stages are seen running through the ten central poems with the poet firstly going into shock and denial, subsequently moving through a series of extreme emotions — anger, depression, musings on suicide, excessive meditation on the deceased, disorientation and insanity and finally progressing to memory and reconciliation. It is only in Poem 10 ("Crucifixion"), after another experience of emotional breakdown, in poems 7 – 9, that Akhmatova shows definite signs of accepting her loss.

As mentioned earlier, the movement from grief and despair to consolation is a hesitant one, with the poet particularly concerned in the expression of her sorrow and suffering, and the real sense of consolation comes only towards the end of the poem in the form of remembrance and defence of the suffering of the victims as well as that of the women who shared the same plight as the poet. Bailey further states, "*Requiem* aspires not only to immortalize the son or even the mother's love for her son, but to acknowledge the reality of the Terror in such a way that will not allow history to forget". [20] This is the consolatory formula that Akhmatova employs in Requiem. The "Prelude" and Epilogue I give a brief yet clear summary of the Terror as seen from the point of view of the prisoner as well as the mother. This cohesive delineation of the tragic events that pervade the entire nation comes in the form of a "memorialisation of the events as they truly happened". [21] In an elegy the memorialisation of events is part of the consolatory formula and represents the poet's effort in working out a scheme of remembrance.

On the other hand, in "By Way of a Preface" and Epilogue II a clear strategy of defence and the will of the poet to overcome the Terror is noticed. In "By Way of a Preface" Akhmatova promises the women a strategy of defence and a subsequent consolation in her acceptance to speak for them when a woman whispered to her:

— And could you describe this?"
And I answered her:
— I can

In Epilogue II, the poem defines the manner and medium that the poet shall use to fulfil her promise and thus work out the final resolution of grief. First of all, the faceless women in "By Way of a Preface" are given a definite identity in Epilogue II and the poet makes an effort "to remember each one by her name" and to "think of them everywhere, always, each one". Secondly, in contrast to the whispered question in "By Way of a Preface", the women in Epilogue II have recovered their verbal abilities: "And one tossed her beautiful head back when shown / Her corner, and said: "It's like being back home!". This verbal "presence", a term Peter Sacks – a prominent critic on the elegy – uses, does not only restore identity and significance to the poet and the other grieving women but also fills the void left by the absence of the victims who were executed or exiled to Siberia.

Finally, Akhmatova weaves a mantle of words in order to embrace all the survivors under one rubric: "I've worked them a funeral shroud from each word / Of pain that escaped them, and I overheard" (Epilogue II). This process of weaving is another convention of the elegy, which is weaving a consolation usually accomplished at the end of the poem.

Thus, it can be seen that this chapter not only attempts to look at Requiem as an elegy but, through an examination of the poem with the help of genre criticism, to also place it under a particular category of the genre, that is, the unconventional elegy. Further, the unconventionality of the poem is highlighted in the way the conventions have been followed and modified — while still making use of various conventions of the traditional elegy, the poem, as seen above, does not always adhere to them entirely. The chapter has also sought to clarify that the modifications made on the conventions are not as drastic as those seen in the modern elegy, which focuses on mourning that is "unresolved, violent, and ambivalent". [22]

Chapter IV: Requiem and the Northern Elegies: A Comparison

In the previous chapter attempts have been made to study the nature of Requiem and to show how the poem fits the definition of the unconventional elegy. In addition to this, the poem also follows many of the major conventions of the elegy. But the study of the nature of the poem — undertaken with reference to the definitions and conventions of the elegy — would be more exhaustive if a study with some of Akhmatova's other elegies is also undertaken. This chapter, therefore, undertakes a comparison between Requiem and the Northern Elegies [23]

in order to further highlight the elegiac nature of Requiem by pointing up the similarities and differences between them.

To begin with, a brief discussion of the Northern Elegies has been attempted to see whether the poems fit the definitions of an elegy. The Northern Elegies initially comprise seven "fragmentary" poems with one more addition made later, which is the even more fragmentary "Lyrical Digression on the seventh Elegy". These poems, written at different stages of the poet's life, have been described by the poet herself as elegies. Judith Hemschemeyer, a prominent critic and translator of Akhmatova's poetry, in her translation of the poems in The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova, remarked that the Northern Elegies were "superb...in which Akhmatova mingled personal, historical and political motifs". [24] These themes can be seen running through the seven-poem sequence dealt with in a melancholy tone.

Although the Northern Elegies are fragmentary poems, they are not altogether without a pattern. The poet is in the future, examining her past and dividing that past into two stages. In the first stage, she speaks about things as they had been when she was young, full of ideas and hope ["...we were both young / And full of ideas" ("Sixth")] in the company of her husband and child. In the second stage she speaks about the terrible things that were to happen and the sad changes that "rechanneled" ("Third") her life. In thus looking at her past, the poet

thematically weaves the historical, the personal and the political to give voice to her immense sorrow. This is in keeping with their nature as elegies, which are, as Friezman says, "above all characterised by the melancholic mood, sadness, lamentation, etc., but ... usually not related to death and mourning" and this definition, he reinstates, "fits Akhmatova's Northern Elegies". [25]

The poems reveal a serious meditation on history and the poet's sad experiences, both personal and as a result of the persecution of her near and dear ones at the hands of the Soviet regime during the time of Stalin. In her meditation on the history of the country, the poet is painfully aware of a Russia that "Resemble an old lithograph" ("Prehistory") with its dark and unpleasant past. She laments the destruction and the turmoil brought about by wars and revolutions that mar the entire Russian history, and at the same time she is saddened by the effects of these disastrous events, which resulted in the loss of an established order when

> Everything out of order, rushed, somehow...
> Fathers and grandfathers incomprehensible.
> Lands mortgaged.

While lamenting the gloom that overshadows her country, Akhmatova sees the chaos of a nation reflected in her own wretched life. From the second to the sixth elegies, the poet laments the horrific

turn of events and the sorrowful conditions of her life. She grieves over her utter failure in love: "And some other woman occupied / The special place reserved for me" ("Third"); her loneliness and isolation: "I myself, from the very beginning" ("Fifth"); the missed opportunities that might have brought her happiness: "Oh, how many spectacles I've missed" ("Third"); and the harrowing experiences at the hands of the brutal Stalinist regime. It was during Stalin's "stern age" that Akhmatova experienced the greatest misery of her life. In the seventh elegy and in "Lyrical Digression on the Seventh Elegy", Akhmatova reveals the atrocities meted out to her and to the people of Russia by the Soviet government; how the government had silenced her through the censorship of her poetry and how that was "deforming my fate, / It almost devoured my soul".

In the course of examining the Northern Elegies, it has been observed that the sense of melancholy that pervades the poems resembles very closely the grief and anguish expressed by the poet in Requiem. Both poems treat the themes at the personal, the historical and the political level. At the personal level, Requiem speaks strongly about the loss experienced by the mother as a result of the arrests and sentencing of her son, the loss of her husband, Gumilev, who was arrested and executed in 1921; the arrest of Nikolai Punin in 1938; and the death of her poet friend Osip Mandelstam in a camp in Siberia in

1939. In the Northern Elegies, however, at the personal level, the poet laments the loss of her own self-identity as she, like a river, "Was rechanneled by this stern age" ("Third") of Stalin and who, as a result of this, is left to wander about like a "somnambulist" whose potential has been scotched and whose opportunities have been destroyed.

Both the poems are also steeped in historical allusions. While in Requiem Akhmatova makes allusions to "the wives of the Streltsy" who wailed and pleaded for their husbands who were executed by Peter the Great in 1698, even as she is now silently wailing at the prison gates at Leningrad for the release of her son, in the Northern Elegies, the poet refers to "the convict from Omsk", that is, Dostoevsky who understood how "the country shivers", because of similar persecutions, even during his time. By doing so the poet, in both poems, firmly places the Stalin reign of terror in the tradition of fear and cruelty, which could be found in the country's past.

However, it is with reference to the political motif that a closer resemblance is seen between the two poems. In Requiem, the entire cycle of poems chronicles the arrest and sentencing of Akhmatova's son and also exposes the grief and suffering of the mother. After the arrest of her son, Akhmatova undergoes a series of emotions, ranging from shock to denial and anger and is hanging dangerously close to insanity. But although this progression in the expression of grief is not

seen in the Northern Elegies, the "Seventh" and "Lyrical Digression on the Seventh Elegy" are nonetheless stark revelations of the torment the poet had to endure during the Stalin years of terror. In the "Seventh", the poet talks about her crippling silence imposed upon her by the government's ruthless censorship on her poetry. However, just as Akhmatova takes upon herself the responsibility to speak for the people of Russia in Requiem, in the Northern Elegies she resolves to break the silence imposed on her and to expose the acts of terror perpetuated on the Russian masses: "But I will break it some day / To summon death to the whipping post".

Although, the two poems are seen to be similar to each other on various important aspects in the treatment of the themes of grief and suffering, it is only when the two poems are examined from the point of view of the elegy that the dissimilarity between them becomes clearly defined. Requiem is classed as an unconventional elegy dwelling on the theme of loss and mourning and on the idea of life's mutability and its transience. The Northern Elegies, on the other hand, are called elegies by virtue of being poems that have an underlying tone of "melancholic mood", in which Friezman defined as poems "characterised by the melancholic mood, sadness, lamentation, etc., but ... usually not related to death and mourning". The Northern Elegies can also be said to be elegies if the Classical definition of the genre is

applied to them. According to the definition an elegy is also "any type of serious, subjective meditation on the part of the poet, whether this reflective element was concerned with death, love, war or merely the presentation of information". [26] Another dissimilarity between the two poems is the fact that Requiem follows a definite elegiac contour of grief-consolation-remembrance. The Northern Elegies are closer to the modern elegies, which according to Jahan Ramazani do not make use of any consolatory formula but wallow deeper and deeper in the very loss that has created them:

> ...modern elegists 'practise losing farther, losing faster' [and the] 'One Art' of the modern elegy is not transcendence or redemption of loss but immersion in it. (POM pp. 1-31)

Chapter V: Conclusion

Having attempted to study the nature of Requiem and the Northern Elegies as elegies through the use of genre criticism, this chapter undertakes an assessment of Akhmatova as an elegiac poet while also summing up arguments previously made. In making this assessment, the chapter also examines her love poems, many of which have been described by critics like Leonid I. Strakhovsky as "tragic". As he puts it, in these poems, "Akhmatova speaks about...simple intimate and personal sorrow" of love, "love's parting, unrequited love, love's betrayal...feelings of grief, of loneliness, of despair".[27]

From a brief examination of her early poetry, starting from Evening (1912) to Plantain and Anno Domini MCMXXI (1921), it can be seen that Akhmatova's encounters with the grim realities of life have influenced her poetry, which is dominated by a melancholy reflection on life's transience and its sorrows. Her early poetry speaks about the poet's miserable private life — her lonely childhood, her failure in love, the missed opportunities of her life. And her later works, more specifically Requiem and the Northern Elegies, bemoan not only her personal losses and the terrifying experiences of her life but also the cruelty, the suppression, the large-scale and systematic purges during the Stalin years of terror.

Akhmatova has written over eight hundred poems and has made an ineffaceable mark on the readers of poetry all over the world. Though the bulk of her work is pervaded with intense emotions of grief, despair and mourning, yet, it must be remembered that it never degenerates into mawkish sentimentalism. Her ability to write about her grief in controlled yet lyrically moving lines always reminds the reader of P. B. Shelley's lines that "Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought". As one of her prominent critics, Roberta Reeder had said, her ability to capture the essence of "a character, event, or philosophical idea through a few carefully chosen details" makes her one of the finest poets of the twentieth century.

Endnotes

[1] All biographical information is based on:

(a) Anna Akhmatova, Selected Poems, ed. and trans. Walter Arndt (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976).

(b) Anna Akhmatova, Requiem, ed. Walter Arndt, trans. Robin Kemball (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976).

(c) Jeffrey W. Hunter et al, ed., "Akhmatova, Anna", Contemporary Literary Criticism Vol. 126 (Farmington Hills, Michigan: The Gale Group, 2000).

[2] Innokenty Annensky was a distinguished Russian poet who also taught Greek at Tsarkoe Selo *gimnazija* where Akhmatova had studied. Nikolai Gumilev was Akhmatova's first husband. He was the father of Lev Gumilev, Akhmatova's only son. He was also one of the founding members of the Acmeist group of poets. Though he was one of Akhmatova's mentors, he had initially discouraged her from writing.

[3] See 1c above.

[4] See Walter Arndt, Anna Akhmatova: Selected Poems at 1a above. Due to the intense expression of emotion in her love poems and the profound beauty of her lines, lovers in Russia used to quote liberally from her poems in their love letters.

[5] David Crystal, ed., The New Penguin Encyclopedia (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2002). The Russian Revolution which overthrew the Russian imperialist regime and set up the first Marxist proletarian state. Mass demonstrations of revolutionary workers and soldiers in Petrograd led to the abdication of Nicholas II and the overthrow of the imperial government in February 1917. There followed a

period of power-sharing between a provisional government and the Petrograd Soviet, known as 'dual power'. Lenin's Bolsheviks refused to collaborate, and in October led an insurgency of armed workers, soldiers, and sailors, seizing political power and establishing the first Soviet government. Under the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (March 3, 1918), Russia gave up the Baltic states, Finland, Poland, and the Ukraine. Opposition to Russia losing these territories led to the Red Terror, in which counter-revolutionaries (Whites) were arrested and executed. The Red Army defeated White Russian forces in 1921. With Lenin's Russian Communist party in full control, strikes and peasant uprisings were suppressed. In December 1922, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was officially established.

[6] See Roberta Reeder, ed., "Mirrors and Masks", The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova (Massachusetts: Zephyr Press, 2006) 17-33.

[7] See Sharon M. Bailey, "An Elegy for Russia: Akhmatova's Requiem", The Slavic and East European Journal Vol. 43, No. 2 (1999) 324-346.

[8] Ibid

[9] See Jeffrey W. Hunter et al, ed., "Akhmatova, Anna", Contemporary Literary Criticism Vol. 126 (Farmington Hills, Michigan: The Gale Group, 2000).

[10] See 7 above.

[11] See Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, "Hiraeth, Soso Tham and the Elegiac Tradition", Hiraeth and the Poetry of Soso Tham (A Study of Tham's Major Poem, Ki Sngi Ba Rim U Hynniew Trep and Related Poems), diss., North-Eastern Hill University, 2005. 32. The quotations that follow will be from this source unless indicated otherwise.

The dissertation has based this definition on the following books:

a. Chris Baldick, The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 66-7.

b. M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms 7th Edition (New Delhi: Harcourt India Private Limited, 1999) 72-3.

c. Peter M. Sacks, The English Elegy Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1985) 1-37.

d. Jahan Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) ix-xv, 1-31.

e. S. P. Sen Gupta, ed., Mathew Arnold Selected Poems (Bombay: Orient Longman Limited, 1979) 1-6.

[12] See 7 above.

[13] See Jahan Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) ix-xv, 1-31. The quotations that follow will be from this source unless indicated otherwise.

[14] See 7 above.

[15] See Robin Kemball, trans, Anna Akhmatova: Requiem at 1b above. Musketeers, the first regular regiments of the Russian army formed in 1550 by Ivan IV. Following their revolt in 1698, Peter the Great had over one thousand of them executed and their bodies displayed in public.

[16] See S. P. Sen Gupta, ed., Mathew Arnold Selected Poems (Bombay: Orient Longman Limited, 1979) 1-6.

[17] See 7 above.

[18] See 11 above.

[19] See Therese A. Rando, Grief, Dying and Death: Clinical Interventions for Caregivers (Champaign: Research Press Company, 1984).

[20] See 7 above.

[21] Ibid

[22] See 13 above.

[23] See Judith Hemschemeyer, Trans, "Translator's Preface", The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova (Massachusetts: Zephyr Press, 2006) 1-16.

[24] See 23 above: 829. All textual quotations of the Northern Elegies are taken from this source.

[25] See 7 above.

[26] See 11above.

[27] See Leonid I. Strakhovsky, "Anna Akhmatova –Poetess of Tragic Love", American Slavic and East European Review Vol. 6, No. 1 & 2 (1947): 2.s

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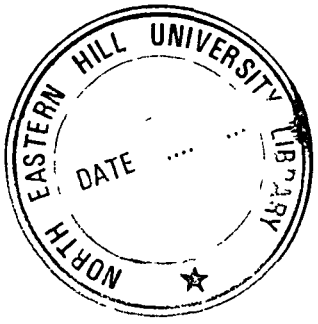
ANNA AKHMATOVA AS AN ELEGIAC POET: A STUDY OF REQUIEM AS AN ELEGY IN RELATION TO THE NORTHERN ELEGIES

GAVETT ROCKLE RUMNONG

DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT

OF THE DEGRE OF MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH



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I, **Gavett Rockle Rumnong**, hereby declare that the subject matter of this dissertation is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this dissertation did not form the basis of an award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else and that the dissertation has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/ Institute.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Firstly, I would like to express my gratefulness to God for His abundant blessings showered upon life. My sincerest and heartfelt gratitude goes to Dr. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih whose able guidance and profound insights have not only propelled me to the completion of this work but have also opened up my mind to new horizons of thought and awareness, such as those that have come to bear a large influence in my life.

I also extend my gratitude to the entire English Department for their support and encouragement during the course of my work. My thanks also goes to the office staff for their help and service.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my family for their patience and love; my cousins for their support; my friends for their views and comments, which in more ways than one have contributed to my better understanding of my work.

Gavett R. Rumnong

Department of English

October 2008

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Chapter I

Introduction: The Making and Development of Requiem

Anna Andreevna Gorenko, or more popularly, Anna Akhmatova, was born on 23 June 1888 in Kiev, Russia. [1] In 1905 her father, a naval architect, moved the family to the Baltic. Shortly after her father and mother separated, the family settled in Tsarkoe Selo, near St. Petersburg where Akhmatova spent her childhood and adolescence. Harnessing her poetic genius at the early age of eleven, she later adopted I. Annensky and then N. Gumilev [2] as her mentors. Her emotional affinity with Gumilev culminated in their marriage in 1910.

Anna Andreevna Gorenko wrote under the pen name of Anna Akhmatova since "her middle-class father had asked her not to dishonour their family name with literary pursuits". [3] She published her first volume of verse, Vecher (Evening) in 1912. Some of her other important works include Chetki (Rosary, 1914), Belaya Staya (White Flock, 1917), Poema Bez Groya; Triptykh (Poem Without a Hero, 1960), Rekviem (Requiem, 1964) and the Northern Elegies, published posthumously in 1985. [4] An interesting anecdote reveals how Akhmatova made her emphatic entrance into the Russian poetic scene. It was in 1911, at a weekly gathering held every Wednesday at the

residence of the famed poet Vyacheslav Ivanov [5], that Akhmatova first received recognition of her poetic talent. Poets — well known, less established and beginners — would gather at Ivanov's and the beginners, overwhelmed by intense pressure and trepidation would stand up one by one to recite their poems. They would then wait eagerly for the host's reaction for his approval was a verdict of acceptance to the society of established poets. At the time, Akhmatova had been recently married to Gumilev and in the words of Korney Chukovsky, a close contemporary of Akhmatova, she was "thin as could be and gracefully built, resembling a shy fifteen-year-old, she took not a step away from her husband, who right there, upon our first acquaintance, called her his 'pupil'".[6] As reported by Leonid I. Strakhovsky, as her turn to recite came she rose from the comforting presence of her husband, a ruby glow spreading across the paleness of her cheeks, and began to read with a nervous confidence. Absolute silence followed as Akhmatova sat down at the end of her reading. Then Ivanov walked up to her and kissing her hand said, "Anna Andreyevna, I congratulate you and welcome you. This poem is an event in Russian literature".[7]

In that same year Gumilev founded the Poets' Guild and along with six of its members, which included Gumilev himself, Akhmatova, Sergey Gorodetsky, Mandelstam, Vladimir Narbut, and Mikhail

Zenevich, founded Acmeism, a movement that rejected the "mysticism and stylistic obscurity of Symbolism". [8] One year later, in 1912, Akhmatova came out with her first book of verse, Vecher (Evening), adopting the Acmeist mode of "Lyric directness, authenticity of feeling, palpability of image and phrase". [9] In the words of Leonid I. Strakhovsky, "the preciseness and selection of words in their true fundamental and not transitory sense are early traits of Akhmatova's poetry". It may be added that this characteristic pervaded throughout her poetry and "ionised...the stale poetic medium left by Symbolism as it waned prematurely". [10]

In 1914 Akhmatova came out with another volume of poems, Chetki (Rosary). Here as in her first volume, the poet explores similar themes revealing a young woman deeply in love. Her poems read like "an intimate diary of a woman in love",[11] which are exquisitely intimate and personal. Disappointment in love becomes the underlying theme of this volume of poems, as it is of Evening. Akhmatova also infuses religious motifs into her poems and juxtaposes them with expressions of worldly love. This bold act drew a myriad of harsh and vulgar criticism, which in a way only heightened her popularity and fame. The most notorious censure came from Andrey Zhdanov, Stalin's inquisitor, who labelled Akhmatova as "half nun, half harlot".[12] In spite of a wave of bitter criticism against her, public

response to her poems was immense, so much so that "her book was sold out in record time and her name was soon on the lips of lovers of poetry throughout the length and breadth of Russia". [13] who begun quoting extensively from her love poems in their love letters.

When Belaya Staya (The White Flock) came out in 1917, there is a change in her poetry also noticed by her critics. They remarked that "Akhmatova clothes the emotional fullness of her poems in the form of a conversation or a story told to someone present".[14] Her poems have become shorter in length but remained "sharp and intimate". Although love poems predominated thematically, war poems are also included in this volume – "premonitory poems about World War I, poems confessing the betrayal of the soldier by the woman back home, anguished poems about the death of young men".[15]

Experiences of a darker shade, however, diversifies her themes and transforms her into a more mature poetic voice as manifested in her later poems. These experiences firstly took the shape of her divorce with Gumilev in 1918 and her subsequent marriage to Vladimir Shileiko whom she also left in 1921. Moreover, the 1917 Revolution [16] and the events thereafter compounded her problems and changed her poetry forever. In 1921 her first husband Nikolai Gumilev was seized on the charge of counter-revolutionary conspiracy and was executed. In 1935 her only son, born of Gumilev, was arrested and was

subsequently exiled to fourteen years in a Siberian prison, an incident which led to the composition of the now famous Requiem. In 1946, Akhmatova was denounced by Andrey Zhadanov and was expelled from the Congress of Soviet Writers. It was only after the death of Stalin in 1953 that she was readmitted into the Union. The years that followed brought greater world recognition for Akhmatova. In 1964 she won the Etna-Taormina International Poetry Prize and in 1965 she received an honorary doctorate degree from Oxford University. Akhmatova continued to write and translate late into her life. She died after a long illness on 5 March 1966 in Komarovo, near Leningrad where she had lived since the early sixties.

It was the arrest of her son, Lev Gumilev, which initially inspired Akhmatova to compose the group of melancholy poems that were later to be strung together in Requiem. The poem was written at the height of the Stalinist Terror, in which as many as "40 million people [Akhmatova's son included] were arrested, exiled or executed".[17] Lev Gumilev was first arrested in 1933 [18] for no palpable cause except that he was the son of renowned literary parents whose works were looked upon with suspicion by political leadership under Stalin. Nikolai Gumilev, was one of the sympathisers of the White Army during the Civil War and it was this that led to the arrest of Lev Gumilev. Although he was arrested in 1933, he was released shortly

after, only to be arrested again in 1935 along with Nikolai Punin, one of Akhmatova's writer friends, a well known art critic and supporter of the Russian avant-garde. This time he was held in the prison in Leningrad for seventeen months.

As could be learned from Requiem itself, Akhmatova made frequent visits to the gates of the prison — that was as near as she could get to her son, as the prisoners were isolated from the outside world. Each day she would rise with the sun and join thousands of other women who queued along the cold walls of the prison in the hope of seeing their loved ones or hearing news about their fate. Much of the time they saw nothing and heard nothing except for the clanking of keys and the heavy footsteps of the sentries. Occasionally the top of the light-blue caps of the NKVD (secret police) appeared at the tops of walls. Sometimes 'Black Marias', vans belonging to the secret police, made their entrances and exits, transporting prisoners who were never to be seen again. Many of those imprisoned along with Gumilev were peasants, whose enormous population opposed the Government's move to "forcibly collectivize agriculture".[19] Desperate not to lose their land, the hapless peasants staged a resistance by burning the crops and killing their own livestock. This resulted in widespread famine, in which millions starved and died. When the purges of Stalin against such resistance started in the early 1930s, millions more were arrested,

tortured, isolated and neglected in prison cells for long periods of time, and finally taken away to work in concentration camps in Siberia or executed. Gumilev along with thousands others were arrested for the third time in March 1938 and he was initially kept at the notorious Kresty prison in Leningrad, forcing Akhmatova to visit the prison gates together with the thousands of other women all over again.

The memory and loss of her husband, Nikolai Gumilev, is yet another source of inspiration for the poet as Akhmatova makes allusions to his death in some of the poems, where she reflects the event in the image of a "widow after the bier" (poem 1). In the second poem of Requiem, she clearly reveals her bereavement in the memory of her dead husband and entwines this with the forced absence of her son. These experiences of her husband's execution and her son's repeated arrests and imprisonment became permanently edged in Akhmatova's mind and caused untold agony to her soul so that the only catharsis for her was to give vent to her anguish and expose the nature of the Stalin's regime of terror. But in doing so, Akhmatova voices not only her own grief, yearning and despair but also that of those thousands of other Russian women waiting for some news about their near and dear ones. In effect, therefore, in writing Requiem Akhmatova is expressing "the anguish of mothers whose husbands and sons are suffering, and who helplessly look on, able only to express

their yearning and grief", [20] the suffering of a Nation, which was at the time labouring under a stifling Stalinist Regime, and to record the shared experience of anguish, bereavement and uncertainty. It is because of this that Requiem has been referred to as an elegy for Russia.

Requiem was not, however, written at one go. In fact, the poems were not written at all and the reasons for this could be found in the socio-political and literary backdrop of Russia during the Stalinist period. The period was marked by terror and everyone's safety and freedom was constantly threatened as Isaak Babel, a prominent Russian writer narrates, "Today a man only talks freely to his wife – at night, with the blankets pulled over his head".[21] This kind of fear and sense of insecurity developed out of a train of circumstances, which could be attributed to the manipulation of the life of citizens across Russia by the Stalinist government. In his work Victim Talk: Defense Testimony and Denunciation Under Stalin, Golfo Alexopoulos observes that in "the Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s, it was not unusual for citizens to submit accusations of another's illegal activity to State officials".[22] The Government encouraged such acts of denunciation and "promoted militant class warfare. . . [and] insisted on the presence of various political foes but especially class enemies, the capitalist exploiters who were believed to be "masked" or hiding their

true social identities and political loyalties".[23] Among those who were "disenfranchised" and branded as anti-Soviet elements were former tsarist officials, traders and middlemen, religious activists of all denominations including their family members and administrative officials who were exiled or sentenced by the court for deprivation of rights, and the mentally ill. It was during the Stalin purges that the disenfranchised faced the severest persecutions when they were stripped of all economic and political rights. The denunciation of these classes of citizens in such a way provides the Government with unimaginable power and control over the entire society, both on the economic as well as the socio-political plane and it is in this way that the terror manifested itself, not only in thousands of dead corpses but essentially in the form of a plague that infests itself in the mind of every citizen in every section of society in Russia. As a result citizens became suspicious of one another and inadvertently contributed in further enhancing the power of the State, thus creating an atmosphere of further doubt and insecurity among themselves. Peter Kenez states that it is because "of the terror, parents talk differently to their children, writers wrote differently, workers and managers talk to one another differently....Because of terror, millions perished".[24]

The situation was no less bad for the intellectual class, which also came under the brunt of the purges. Many writers and artists were

arrested, executed or disgraced and banned from producing any work of art, which may in any way seem detrimental to the state. Clare Cavanagh, a critic on Russian literature, terms this as the "death of the book".[25] The literary hand was no longer free as it became a victim to the "rigid rules and prescriptions of Soviet Marxist ideology".[26] This means that literary production was compelled to comply with political ideologies and slogans, which subsequently brought about the loss of the fundamental creative impulse. In this vortex of literary genocide, Akhmatova and Osip Mandelshtam along with other writers underwent what Akhmatova termed as a "civic death" [27] or death as the citizen. Moreover, the formation of the first Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 became a death trap for these writers, a "civic coffin" [28] for Akhmatova. Poets and other writers who did not comply with the formula of the social command were barred from producing. Their creative voice was considered detrimental and was unwelcomed in the state. As a consequent, this voice became as Akhmatova puts it, "dissolve(d) in the official hymn".[29] The Union demanded that they wrote "triumphal marches and collective hymns".[30] Every form of writing was bureaucratized. Strict formulae were intended to be followed and adhered to. The entire literature was controlled by the state, which led to a continuous strain of monotonous slogans, and made slightly livelier with the interjection of new ones – old slogans

embellished and reproduced in a different tone. Although the slogans were designed to create enthusiasm in the production of state literature, they failed in their purpose and the monotony and stagnation persisted. However, writing did not stop altogether as many writers, fearing the worst conformed to such formulae while others practised their art by stealth. Even if there was any sign of the creative faculty at work it was in the form of an undercurrent and for the poets especially, poetry thrived within their hearts.

Although many poets became political suspects and "official non-persons, practitioners of a suspect genre, the lyric, and adherents of an outmoded, "pastist" poetic philosophy, acmeism", [31] Mandelshtam reaffirms the power endowed to poetry when he remarked, "If they're killing people for poetry, that means they honor and esteem it, they fear it...that means poetry is power".[32] In a similar manner Mandelshtam's 'Stalin Epigram' written in 1933 turned 'civic' poetry into a medium to expose the suffocating clutch that Stalin had over the production of literature. Language then becomes the chariot in transporting feelings of dissent and protest. Clare Cavanagh observes in her essay The Death of the Book a la russe: The Acmeists Under Stalin that Mandelshtam's 'Stalin Epigram' hinges between language as metaphor and language as action. This mode in diction has been used by poets to couch the real intent of protest in ambivalence while

at the same time giving the poem the appearance of 'civic' verse. It is also important to note that 'Stalin Epigram' existed only in oral form at the time Mandelshtam composed it and this spoken word travels far further than the written dictates of a rigid authorised source. As such much of the poetic dissent of the time existed mainly in oral form and according to Cavanagh, much of it existed only in pieces of paper hidden or hurriedly memorised. These whispers gather their strength not from any state instrument but from the blue lips of nameless women, from an unauthorised source of millions of sufferers. Another example of this type of poetry is Akhmatova's Requiem, a powerful statement of truth, a poem which has gathered strength from a verbal documentation of the grief and suffering of a nation, a whisper carried on the wings of poetry to serve as reminder of a resistance against the brutal Stalinist regime.

As a poem that grew out of whispers, this is how Requiem began according to Akhmatova herself. During the second arrest of her son Lev, Akhmatova as she had done during the first arrest, joined the thousands of other women suffering the same fate like her to await news of her son's sentencing. As she was standing shivering in the cold, huddled together with the other women, someone from among the crowd identified her and a woman standing behind her with lips "blue and cold" emerged from among the file of faceless figures and

putting her cold lips close to Akhmatova's ears whispered " — And could you describe this?" ("By Way of a Preface") Akhmatova turned round and facing her replied "I can." Immediately a subtle change appeared on her face, something resembling a smile. That was how the first poem in the cycle of poems that were later to be strung together as Requiem was composed. But Akhmatova found it too dangerous for the poem to be put down on paper at the time. Her concern was not without reason as many writers and poets, including Mandelstam, were arrested, exiled or executed. This concern and fear for unimaginable atrocities and persecutions committed on other poets compelled her to devise a strategy to retain the poem and yet conceal it from the suppressive forces working under Stalin. The poem being short she memorised and whispered it to some of her very close and trusted friends requesting them to memorise it in turn in an attempt to make sure that the poem was never forgotten. She did the same with the other poems in the cycle and composed individual verses, memorised them and passed them on. Lidiya Chukovskaya, daughter of the critic, Korney Chukovsky, would often help memorise a poem from time to time. Akhmatova would write a poem in a piece of paper and Chukovskaya would memorise it. The two would then talk about the weather as Akhmatova burns the piece of paper. In this way

Akhmatova preserved her poems over decades of Terror that manifested itself at different levels as indicated earlier.

The censorship on the publication of her poetry from 1924 to 1940 discouraged many of the publishers from publishing her works. This way Requiem, which was verbally composed to a large extent before 1940 was never published until 1963. It was in that same year in Munich, that the poem was first published and translated into English as Requiem. Prior to this, in 1962 Akhmatova had attempted to get Requiem published by the Russian journal Novy mir but was rejected. However, underground copies of her poem had already been in circulation by this time. The first publication of the poem in Russia came only in 1987 in the journals Oktyabr and Neva, then in Anna Akhmatova: Stikhotvoreniya, edited by I. I. Slobozhan (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1989). The major cycle of ten poems in Requiem was composed between 1935 and 1940 and in order to trace the development of Requiem one needs to become familiar with the different dates of composition of the poems that make up the cycle. The first poem was composed in 1935 and is marked by a strong allusion to the arrest of her son and the death of her husband in 1921. Poems 2 and 3 were composed in 1940, and like the first one the exact place of composition is not known although it is believed that most of the poems were composed in Leningrad, the place central to her

experiences of loss and grief. The fourth, fifth and sixth poems were created one year prior to poems 2 and 3 in 1939. Poem 7 ("Sentence") and poem 8 ("To Death") were composed in the same year at 'Fountain House', residence of Nikolai Punin where Akhmatova had gone to live with him in 1926 after her divorce with Vladimir Shileiko that same year. His wife Anna Arens, a doctor, and their daughter Irina also lived there. A year later Akhmatova composed poem 9 in the same year. It was also the year that a ban on her poetry, in effect since 1925, was lifted. That same year Akhmatova began the composition of poem 10 ("Crucifixion"), which comprises two parts. In October 1941 Akhmatova was ordered by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Leningrad to be evacuated to Moscow. From there she made her way to Tashkent, a city in Uzbekistan, and lived there with Osip Mandelstam's wife, Nadezhda, and her mother. It was there that Akhmatova completed the poem. The two epilogues, however, were composed in March 1940 in Leningrad before she left for Tashkent and two months before the composition of the ninth poem. The last poem to be composed was the epigraph, a quatrain, written in 1961. The poem's three introductions, that is, "By Way of a Preface", "Dedication" and "Prelude" were all written in Leningrad on different dates. While "By Way of a Preface" was composed in 1957, "Dedication" in 1940, "Prelude" was undated.

Largely because of its history and development, Requiem has been generally described as a complex cycle of fifteen poems with one prose paragraph. It consists of an epigraph, three introductions and ten poems organized according to their themes. The poems document the arrest and sentencing of her son, along with thousands others, and the periods of intense "grief, denial, incomprehension, and withdrawal" [33] experienced by the poet as she awaited his uncertain fate. A two-part 'Epilogue' closes the cycle, reflecting Akhmatova's reaction to the destructive nature of the Terror and a wish to expose that Terror. The epigraph is a kind of flashback where Akhmatova makes it clear that she consciously willed to stay with her people during the terrible years of the Stalin purges, as many others fled the country. Not only does she express her solidarity and pride to be with them but she also shared their grief and suffering through the death of her husband and the loss of her son. The epigraph also serves as a strong indication that Akhmatova writes not for herself but for all of those millions of Russians who became victims of the same Terror.

The first introduction, "By Way of a Preface" is a prose paragraph and as the title suggests serves as a preface to Requiem. It tells the story of the inception of Requiem as Akhmatova recounts the "terrible years of the Yezhovschina".[34] This prose paragraph sets the tone of the poem as well as encapsulates the terror and "torpor

common to us all" at the height of the Stalin purges. It was in this state of torpor and amidst terror that Akhmatova was asked by a woman — "—And could you describe this?" — to which she answered "I can". Her curt and definite answer to the woman's question reveals the daunting responsibility that Akhmatova undertook to record the terrible wrongs of the time and through her personal grief to record the terrible suffering of the Russian women.

These horrific conditions of loss and grief are elucidated in the second introduction, "Dedication" which speaks in the pathetic fallacy of the "Mountains [bowing] beneath that boundless sorrow, / And the mighty river stops its flow." Nature is seen to participate in the sorrow of the women. Against this bleak background a sense of hopelessness envelops the poem as the women are dragged into a life "more lifeless than the dead." This state of lifelessness that has numbed the lips of many has also left the victims scattered and separated. The poet has now lost touch with those "friends of my misfortune" with whom she has shared similar experiences of suffering and despair and expressed the hope that she could reach them through the task she has taken in her poetry.

The third introduction, "Prelude", gives an intensely vivid description of Russia as the country labours "In her innocence, twisted in pain/ Under blood-spattered boots". Impending death and a life of

constant fear pervades across Russia as "Stars of death" hang over the country and its people. Throughout the poem the poet paints the picture of a Russia under the throes of imprisonments, torture and execution so that even the dead seems to be better off and "were glad of release".

The ten poems which form the main body of Requiem were written in a span of five years as Akhmatova chronicles and documents the agony of the Russian people (hers included) during the Terror years. The poems arouse feelings of intense pathos and by recounting the unfortunate events that plagued her, Akhmatova is able to map out an elaborate passage of suffering, mourning, consolation and commemoration. In doing so each successive poem moves from one degree of pain and grief to another. The first poem begins with a bold statement of the poet's grief which is equivalent to the sorrow of a widow: "It was dawn when they took you, I followed, / As a widow walks after the bier". (poem 1) The anguish experienced by the poet further slips into despair and sense of helplessness, finally climaxes with the sentencing of the son: "And the word in stone has fallen heavy/ On my breast" (poem 7, "Sentence"). The cycle of poems gradually evolves as the poet undergoes a myriad of emotions — shock, distress, denial, confusion, anger and insanity. Each of these stages of emotional and mental breakdown is acutely described in the

poems. Finally the poet moves into a state of acceptance and reconciliation:

Weeks fly past in light profusion,
How to fathom what's been done:
How those long white nights, dear son,
Watched you in your cell's seclusion.

(poem 6)

The cycle ends with a two-part Epilogue, in which Akhmatova consciously react against the ravages of terror by devising a "verbal strategy of [defence and] remembrance". [35] Despite the Epilogue written five years after the event, the poet seems to be haunted by the suffering and the horrible images of the past. In her search for consolation, in "Epilogue I", the poet deliberately wills herself into re-enactment of the suffering of the years of terror as a defence against the continuity of that suffering. In an attempt to exorcise the tormenting spectres of those terrible years of bereavement, loss and grief, she recalls the images of the tormented women:

How cheeks, carved out of suffering and of sorrow,
Take on the lines of rough cuneiform scripts.
How heads of curls, but lately black or ashen,
Turn suddenly to silver overnight.

(Epilogue I)

This re-enactment seems to have a soothing effect on the poet and in "Epilogue II", she is able to write more calmly yet intensely and vividly about the experiences of the past and all her fellow sufferers: "The hour of remembrance is with us again. / I see you, I hear you, I feel you as then". In this calm state of mind, the poet remembers the women more clearly, seeing them as individuals restored of their basic human elements, such as the ability of speech: "And one tossed her beautiful head back when shown / Her corner, and said: "It's like being back home!". The poet also expresses a desire to know them by name: "I'd like to remember each one by her name". She does not want to lose the memory of these women or the experiences she shared with them, and in an effort to save them from forgetfulness she has "worked them a funeral shroud from each word / Of pain that escaped them, and I overheard". Having woven this funeral shroud, the poet undergoes a catharsis, in which she comes to terms with her grief and subsequently recovers from it. It is as if she has buried all the pain with the writing of the Epilogue. Towards the end of the Epilogue the poet speaks about a monument erected to her memory in front of the Leningrad prison. Although this bronze monument exists only in the poet's mind, it is the poem that stands out as the actual monument of commemoration for all the atrocities meted out on millions of innocent people during the Stalinist regime. As Akhmatova constructs Requiem she also

constructs a monument of words. It is in erecting a monument that the final resolution of overcoming the grief is accomplished.

Although Akhmatova composed the fifteen poems of Requiem on different dates, she has been able to arrange them in such a manner that the poem becomes a coherent whole in description and in theme. According to Hemschemeyer, Akhmatova organises her poems into 'thematic cycles' and marks them with short rules (——) to indicate the completion of each cycle. The theme of grief runs strongly across the entire poem, which can be seen on two levels. Firstly, the theme is seen in the documentation of Akhmatova's suffering – the grief in the loss of her husband and peers, the repeated imprisonments and subsequent exile of her son and her own suffering and grief while waiting anxiously for word of her imprisoned son. Secondly, Requiem does not only remain a poem of personal anguish, but Akhmatova also universalises her theme as seen in "By Way of a Preface" when she agrees to speak for the people of Russia, especially the women who suffered along with her, with a firm "I can". In this way the poem develops into "a lament for the people of Russia [and] its scale is simultaneously enormous and intimate" [36] so much so that the poem has been described by critics such as Sharon M. Bailey as an "elegy for Russia".

It is with the description of the poem as an elegy that one comes face to face with the problem that is at the centre of any serious evaluation of Requiem as a poem. This is also the problem that will be taken up by this study, for the most obvious question that presents itself is whether Requiem is an elegy at all. In attempting to answer such questions and to discover its true character, this study will examine the poem from the point of view of the elegiac tradition. It will also compare the poem's treatment with that of Akhmatova's handling of a group of poems broadly categorised as the Northern Elegies, which according to L. G. Frizman, a prominent critic of Akhmatova's poetry, are not formal elegies but are merely elegiac in character. In effect, the Northern Elegies will be used as a tool to study the elegiac nature of Requiem.

Endnotes

[1] All biographical information is based on:

(a) Anna Akhmatova, Selected Poems, ed. and trans. Walter Arndt (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976).

(b) Anna Akhmatova, Requiem, ed. Walter Arndt, trans. Robin Kemball (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976).

(c) Jeffrey W. Hunter et al, ed., "Akhmatova, Anna", Contemporary Literary Criticism Vol. 126 (Farmington Hills, Michigan: The Gale Group, 2000).

[2] Innokenty Annensky was a distinguished Russian poet who also taught Greek at Tsarkoe Selo *gimnazija* where Akhmatova had studied. Nikolai Gumilev was Akhmatova's first husband. He was the father of Lev Gumilev, Akhmatova's only son. He was also one of the founding members of the Acmeist group of poets. Though he was one of Akhmatova's mentors, he had initially discouraged her from writing.

[3] See 1c above.

[4] See Walter Arndt, Anna Akhmatova: Selected Poems at 1a above.

[5] See Leonid I. Strakhovsky, "Anna Akhmatova –Poetess of Tragic Love", American Slavic and East European Review Vol. 6, No. 1 & 2 (1947): 1. The incident was reported by Leonid I. Strakhovsky.

[6] See Walter Arndt ed., "The Akhmatova Phenomenon", Anna Akhmatova: Selected Poems (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976): xvi.

[7] See 5 above.

[8] See 1c above.

[9] See 6 above. xiii.

[10] Ibid

[11] See 5 above. 2.

[12] See Judith Hemschemeyer, trans., "Translator's Preface", The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova (Massachusetts: Zephyr Press, 2006) 3.

[13] See 5 above. 3.

[14] See 5 above. 11.

[15] See 12 above. 3.

[16] David Crystal, ed., The New Penguin Encyclopedia (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2002). The Russian Revolution which overthrew the Russian imperialist regime and set up the first Marxist proletarian state. Mass demonstrations of revolutionary workers and soldiers in Petrograd led to the abdication of Nicholas II and the overthrow of the imperial government in February 1917. There followed a period of power-sharing between a provisional government and the Petrograd Soviet, known as 'dual power'. Lenin's Bolsheviks refused to collaborate, and in October led an insurgency of armed workers, soldiers, and sailors, seizing political power and establishing the first Soviet government. Under the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (March 3, 1918), Russia gave up the Baltic states, Finland, Poland, and the Ukraine. Opposition to Russia losing these territories led to the Red Terror, in which counter-revolutionaries (Whites) were arrested and executed. The Red Army defeated White Russian forces in 1921. With Lenin's Russian Communist party in full control, strikes and peasant uprisings were suppressed. In December 1922, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was officially established.

[17] See Sharon M. Bailey, "An Elegy for Russia: Akhmatova's Requiem", The Slavic and East European Journal Vol. 43, No. 2 (1999) 324.

[18] See Roberta Reeder, ed., "Chronology", The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova, trans. Judith Hemschemeyer, (Massachusetts: Zephyr Press, 2006) 60.

[19] See Roberta Reeder, ed., "Mirrors and Masks", The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova, trans. Judith Hemschemeyer (Massachusetts: Zephyr Press, 2006) 25.

[20] Ibid. 26.

[21] See Robert Conquest, "What is Terror?", Slavic Review Vol. 45, No. 2 (1986). 235.

[22] See Golfo Alexopoulos, "Victim Talk: Defense Testimony and Denunciation Under Stalin", Law and Social Inquiry Vol.24, No. 3 (1999) 637-654.

[23] Ibid.

[24] See Peter Kenez, "Stalinism as Humdrum Politics", The Russian Review Vol. 45 (1986) 399.

[25] See Clare Cavanagh, "The Death of the Book a la russe: The Acmeists under Stalin", Slavic Review Vol. 55, No. 1 (1996). 127.

[26] See Helen Iswolsky, "Latest Trends in Soviet Literature", Russian Review Vol. 1, No. 1 (1941). 74.

[27] See 25 above. 128.

[28] Ibid. 129.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid. 128.

[32] Ibid. 127-28.

[33] See 17 above. 324.

[34] See Robin Kemball, trans, Anna Akhmatova: Requiem at 1b above. The reign of Yeshov. Yeshov was head of the Soviet secret police in the late 1930s until he himself became a victim of one of Stalin's purges.

[35] See 17 above. 325.

[36] See 1c above.

Chapter II

The Elegy, Its Definitions, Conventions and Modern Tendencies

In the previous chapter a reference has been made to Sharon M. Bailey's statement, which refers to Requiem as an "elegy for Russia". It is with the description of the poem as an elegy that one comes face to face with the problem that is at the centre of any serious evaluation of Requiem as a poem of mourning since there is no direct incident of death involved. The presence of some fundamental elegiac conventions in the poem such as "the pathetic fallacy, which is intimately tied to the theme of the universality of death, the progression from grief to consolation, and the ultimate resolution of the work of mourning" [1], provides all the more reason to attempt a study of the poem as an elegy. But before any in depth analysis can be made of the poem, it is necessary to first enter into a discussion of the nature of the elegy, its various conventions and modifications. This chapter, therefore, will discuss the Elegy — its definitions, conventions, and modern tendencies — and also a few samples of the different types of elegies. This will serve as an introductory discussion leading to the next chapter, which proposes to critically analyse Requiem as an elegy.

According to critics of the genre, "There are two possible definitions of the elegy...: one in its traditional sense and the other in

its broader, unconventional sense". [2] The word elegy is derived from the Greek elegeia, which means lament. "In the traditional meaning, the elegy refers to an elaborately formal lyric poem lamenting the death of a friend or public figure. It is characterised by a powerful intertwining of emotion and rhetoric, of loss and figuration, and above all by the movement from mourning to consolation. In literature dirge, threnody, monody and lament are variations of almost the same theme. They are generally shorter versions of the elegy".[3] It may be noted, however, that during the time of the early Greek and Latin writers the definition of the elegy also included "any type of serious, subjective meditation on the part of the poet, whether this reflective element was concerned with death, love, war or merely the presentation of information".[4] Peter Sacks, a renowned critic of the elegy, further enumerates on the subject saying that the conventional elegy includes "exhortary martial epigrams, political philosophy, commemorative lines, or even amatory complaints".[5] In England also the elegy has been employed by various poets not only for lamenting or commemorating the dead but in a variety of subjects. Such elegies include John Donne's Elegies and Chaucer's The Book of the Duchess. But after the sixteenth century, the term elegy carried with it the definition of a poem that speaks thematically of mortal loss and consolation and this is the form of the conventional elegy that has survived till today.

A definite form of the conventional elegy adopted from the Sicilian Greek poets Theocritus, Bion and Moschus, and popular among English poets is the pastoral elegy of which Milton's Lycidas stands out as a prime example. The pastoral elegy is also written "in dignified, serious language, and taking as its theme the expression of grief at the loss of a friend or important person". [6] It employs a set of conventions introduced by Greek and Sicilian poets and developed at the hands of elegists, from Theocritus to Spenser and Milton. They may be listed as under:

> the representation of the dead friend as a shepherd to be mourned by the natural world, or pastoral contextualisation with its apostrophe and pathetic fallacy; the myth of the vegetation deity; the use of repetitions and refrains; the reiterated questioning and the outbreak of vengeful anger or denunciation; the procession of mourners; the passage from grief to consolation and the traditional images of resurrection, transfiguration, stellification and deification. Additional conventions can also be seen in the use of the images of flowers and light, the eclogic division within or between mourning voices, the question of contests, rewards, and inheritance, and the unusual degree of self-consciousness regarding the actual performance of mourning. This last feature relates to the need of the elegist to draw attention to his own surviving powers with a view to consoling himself.[7]

The first among the conventions listed above is the representation of a dead friend as a shepherd. This convention is derived from the Greek

eclogue, which among many of its varieties also served as a dirge lamenting a dead shepherd. Usually the lamentation is performed by another fellow shepherd in a natural and rustic environment. This natural environment not only serves as a background but also plays an important part in the shepherd's mourning and this leads to one of the major conventions of the elegy. This convention is that of the pathetic fallacy.

This convention is derived from the rituals associated with the vegetation god. The personification of the vegetation god in these rituals as human or human-divine helps man to see his own image in nature and at the same time identify that image with its regenerative powers. On the other hand, as man identifies his image with the natural world, he also imposes his will on it so that a reversal of roles may take place whereby there is a reverse of man's submission to nature and its changing seasons. Sacks explicates that "instead of grieving over the inhuman operation of nature or time, a setting and process on which he is unavoidably dependent, man creates a fiction whereby nature and its changes, the occasions of his grief, appear to depend on him. The withering vegetation is now no more the cause of human grief but rather the mourner or even the effect of a human-divine loss". [8]

The convention of displaying anger or bitterness against nature and change subsequently results from the convention of pathetic

fallacy. Following man's attempt in reflecting his grief in the withering of nature, the display of anger may also be studied as a representation of his attempted mastery and vengeance against nature and change. Sacks states that "by the sacrifice or mimed death of the personification of nature, man causes nature's death, or at least brings on her deathlike mourning".[9] In this manner, man attempts to either direct nature to lament or curses it. Subsequently a relationship is drawn between elegiac cursing and grief, a relation found in most traditional elegies like Milton's "Lycidas" and Shelley's "Adonais".

The matter of vengeance and cursing consequently leads to another elegiac convention, that of questioning. This convention, which is at times private and at times sharply interrogative, has been used throughout the history of the elegy. Its functions is to "set free the energy locked in grief and rage and to organize its movement in the form of a question that is not merely an expression of ignorance but a voicing of protest".[10] When the question is addressed to someone repeatedly, the convention turns into a therapeutic ritual, in which the mourner shifts the attention away from the object of loss or himself to the world outside and stops him from becoming completely ensnared in melancholia.

Apart from preventing the mourner from drowning himself/herself in sorrow, the convention of repetitive questioning

performs other functions as well. Firstly, it creates a sense of continuity as opposed to the discontinuity of death. Secondly, it acts as a protective shield against the unsettling shock of death. Thirdly, it creates a rhythm of lament with the repetitions of the words and refrains in order to keep the grief under control while keeping that expression in motion. Fourthly, it confronts the mind with the fact of death so as to achieve recognition of this fact and also to distance the mourner from the dead. Lastly, it invokes the spirit of the dead by repeating its name so that it almost replaces the dead and generates a sense of consolation. It may be noted that this act of repeated questioning either comes from one mourning voice or a division of this voice into many voices.

This division of the mourning voice makes up yet another important convention of the elegy. This division may be in the form of a distinction between mourners or it can be a division within the mourner itself. The purpose of such divisions in the mourning voice is to show the splitting and self-suppression inside the mourner that accompanies the first experience of loss. It also does the work of dramatisation where the mourners infuse ceremony to the rites and also reveal their work as survivors. Lastly, this division of voices acts as a confrontational device for the purpose of recognition of the loss by the mourner.

Another important convention is the movement of the elegy as it follows the ancient rites, which is seen as the passage through grief and darkness to consolation and renewal. The movement from grief and despair to consolation and renewal not only "mimed the death and return of the vegetation god but also represents the initiate's descent to and ascent from a crisis of mysterious revelation". [11] More often than not, this revelation is seen in the resurrection, stellification or deification of the dead of which Milton's "Lycidas" serves as an ideal example. Another point to be added in connection with the movement from loss to consolation is that the movement is always accompanied with an altered sense of perception for the lost object. In the Greek myth of Apollo and Daphne, for instance, Apollo, having insulted Cupid, was cursed with an unrequited love for Daphne. In her flight from Apollo, Daphne flees to the banks of the river where she begged her father, Peneus, for release. When Apollo grabbed her, she turned into a laurel tree. However, the transformation of Daphne from nymph to a laurel plant did not serve any good to Apollo because even as he is able to finally hold the tree, "even the wood shrank from his kisses". [12] It was until when Apollo found the significance of the laurel wreath in: "With thee shall Roman generals wreathe their heads..." [13] that the tree became a consoling substitute for Daphne and only then was he able to accept his loss.

The convention of the elegiac mythology is closely associated with the rites of the return of the vegetation god and its concept of immortality. It affirms man's resurrection and establishes his immortality through the rebirth of nature. Nature's regenerative powers and the principle of recurrent fertility become representations of this immortality. Sacks observes that "the vegetation god is, after all, the predecessor of almost every elegized subject and provides a fundamental trope by which mortals create their images of immortality". [14] The myth of Dionysus, son of Zeus, is an example of such myths of immortality. Dionysus was killed by the Titans who dismembered him and devoured him. In revenge Zeus destroyed the Titans and out of the soot of their remains, mankind was born. Sacks explains that the birth of mankind in such a manner invested in him the element of ingested divinity. Legend has it that Dionysus' heart was hidden in a fruit basket and the survival of his heart enabled his rebirth through the union of Zeus and Semele, a mortal.

The image of light is also an important convention used in elegies. Several layers of meaning have been attached to it. The foremost is its significance as a source of energy that conquers darkness and outlasts mortal man. As Achilles mourned the death of Patroclus, his wrath produces "Around his Brows a golden Cloud she spread/ A Stream of Glory flam'd above his Head". [15] Other variations

of this image have been used by Milton and other conventional elegists.

The concept of poetic inheritance is one more addition to the list of elegiac conventions. There has always been a close relation between mourning and the act of inheritance throughout history. Margaret Alexiou, a critic on ancient Greek ritual laments, elaborates that among the Greeks unless one mourns he is prevented from inheriting. Inheritance also warrants a display or demonstration of greater strength and closeness by the heir to the dead than his rivals and that he should wrest his inheritance from the dead.

Apart from the conventions listed above the construction of the conventional elegy centres on the elementary images of weaving. This is done in order to create a 'fabric' that takes the place of the void. In "Lycidas" Camus dons a meticulously embroidered hem "inwrought with figures dim". Tennyson, in In Memoriam, compares himself to a blind man winding the curls of children's hair, or is seen playing with threads. The process of weaving, according to Peter Sacks, is related with the intention "of weaving a consolation" (P19), which is usually accomplished at the close of an elegy. He further adds that the task of the actual weaving of burial clothes and shrouds emphasise that mourning is a ritualistic and psychological action and not only a pastoral contextualisation.

A few samples of the conventional pastoral elegy are "Lament for Bion" attributed to Moschus, Bion's "Lament for Adonis" and Theocritus' "First Idyll". In England among the major ones are Spenser's "The Shepheardes Calender", John Donne's "Elegies", Milton's "Lycidas", P. B. Shelley's "Adonais", and Lord Alfred Tennyson's "In Memoriam". Among these "Lycidas" is considered to be the most renowned because of its close resemblance to classical elegies and its elaborate use of the pastoral conventions and should be examined more closely in connection with the conventions. James Holly Hanford in his essay The Pastoral Elegy and Milton's Lycidas, observes that Milton had been influenced by Theocritus' poem. These lines in "Lycidas", "Where were ye, Nymphs, when the remorseless deep / Closed o'er the head of your loved Lycidas?" seem to have been taken right out of Theocritus' poem as Thyrsis sings:

> Begin, ye Muses dear, begin the pastoral song.
>
> Thyrsis of Etna am I, and this is the voice of Thyrsis. Where, ah!
>
> Where were ye when Daphnis was languishing; ...

Hanford remarks that "Milton was familiar with it at first hand and consciously adopted it as one of the classical models for *Lycidas*".[16] Another source of influence is the tenth eclogue of Virgil. Milton adopts his style of calling upon "various beings [to] come one after another to add their part to the lament". Moschus' Lament for

Bion is also considered to be yet another source of influence for its use of the pastoral convention of pathetic fallacy, in which nature participates in the poet's grief. In fact "Lycidas" uses many of the conventions associated with the pastoral elegy. Firstly, Milton's poem is occasioned by the death of his peer in Cambridge, Edward King and fulfils the basic characteristic of a traditional elegy, that is, a poem lamenting the death of a friend or public figure. Moreover, the poet makes use of the figure of the shepherd to represent the dead friend. This further establishes the poem as a pastoral elegy. C. T. Thomas observes that pastoral poetry "was used in the Renaissance to tell the story of young poets and scholars disguised as shepherds". [17]

Some of the other conventions found inherent in Milton's "Lycidas" are the procession of mourners, the movement from despair to hope and resurrection, the questioning of the nymphs, and the convention of elegiac mythology with allusions to the myths of Orpheus and Hyacinthus and the images of flowers. Another important feature found in "Lycidas" is the presence of allegorical didacticism. This feature is derived from Boccaccio, Petrarch and Spenser who used the pastoral elegy to express their political and religious views as well as the personal aspirations of the poet himself. The long section in "Lycidas" where Milton attacks the corrupt practises of the clergy is an example of such didacticism. Another section talks about fame and

alludes to the poet's own poetic aspirations. Such adaptations of pastoral conventions from both classical and Renaissance elegists by Milton places "Lycidas" among the most prominent traditional elegies in literature.

These conventions, however, have evolved throughout the history of literature and have undergone extensive modifications over the centuries at the hands of elegists writing through the generations. The genre itself has undergone many revisions and has taken on new forms and possibilities. In the unconventional sense, for instance, the elegy has broadened its scope and "may refer to a poem of serious reflection on a solemn subject or the tragic aspects of life".[18] In order to add on to the meaning of this definition, it may be necessary to include S. P. Sen Gupta's view, who while quoting another critic has drawn a line of distinction between the 'elegiac' and the 'elegy'. The elegiac, he observes, "is an extended version of the elegy and refers to poems having a deep pervasive tone of melancholy reflection on life's transience and its sorrows".[19] These enumerations come out clearly in Sharon M. Bailey's statement that, "while an elegy may be (and usually is) occasioned by death, it is more accurately defined as a poem about loss". [20] Hence, it may be noted that the unconventional elegy has shifted its focus away from death, towards loss and melancholy.

A few examples of the unconventional elegy as identified by critics like M. H. Abrams are, Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard", Mathew Arnold's "Memorial Verses" and "Scholar-Gipsy", and Maria Rainer Rilke's "Duino Elegies". These elegies "may be said to occupy a position somewhere between the traditional and the modern elegy [as] their movement is always from praise to lament and then, to an attempt at consolation" [21] by replacing sorrow with the hope of renewal although the attempt is not always completely successful. It is, therefore, understood that while the unconventional elegy still makes use of various conventions of the traditional elegy it does not always adhere to them entirely.

Such variation from the traditional conventions is seen in the choice of themes, which these poets employ. For instance, Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" mourns the passing away of the forefathers into obscurity and the possible early death of the poet himself. Sen Gupta is also of the opinion that Arnold's "The Scholar Gipsy" and "Memorial Verses" are elegies but do not lament the death of an individual. He further explains that the tone of the poems is elegiac whereby the poet grieves over a decadent age, the death of religious faith and of treasured values of life. Similar adaptation in theme is also noticed in the elegies of Rilke whose "Duino Elegies" emerge from a grieving over a "protracted personal crisis".

These elegies are also unresolved in the act of mourning, which is seen in their resentful anger against the living. Gray shows his anger by a denouncement of his times. Arnold on the other hand directs his anger towards the destruction of man's intuitive powers by a materialistic society. Even their consolations, although not anti-consolatory, are inconclusive and insufficient. Arnold tries to find some consolation in the resigned acceptance of harsh realities and Gray hopes to find it in the lap of the common mother and the bosom of his father, who is God. These consolations, although seemingly comforting in nature, do not actually point towards any form of regeneration or transcendence, which leaves one to believe that the mourner is still enmeshed in his own grief. But then Zahan Ramazani, an authority on the modern elegy, is of the opinion that "consolation may no longer be an important "criterion by which to judge" the elegy, since many of the weakest are merely consolatory and many of the strongest...are poems less of solace than melancholia, less of resolution than of protracted strife". [22]

To elaborate on the nature of the unconventional elegy, a brief discussion of Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" will be done. As mentioned earlier, this poem does not mourn the death of any particular person. However, after critically assessing the poem, Sacks agrees that "Gray's poem is, of course a poem of mourning [and it]

mourns a particular death over and above those of the obscure villagers".[23] It is important to understand that "particular death" here refers to the poet's vision of his own death, "a projection that includes a local swain's account of the poet's life and burial, together with a presentation of the epitaph written by the poet himself".[24]

The poem itself opens with the poet's "solitary courting of prophetic vision" of a rustic landscape at dusk and progresses into a reflection of the "rude forefathers of the hamlet" and their traditional pastoral life, away from the "ignoble strife" of a rich materialistic society. In contemplating the passing of the age, the poet is roused with moral ideas about "the way in which the villagers are deprived of the opportunity of greatness; and by contrast, with the crimes inextricably involved in success as the 'thoughtless world' knows it, from which the villagers are protected". As a result, the poet contrasts the life of the poor and the rich, their virtues and their vices and forbids the mockery of their simple rustic lives as wealth, power and arrogance become useless because in the end "The paths of glory lead but to the grave". From here the poem then turns to a contemplation of life and death and "a preoccupation with the desire to be remembered after death, a concern which draws together both rich and poor, making the splendid monuments and the "frail memorial" pathetic".

Lament in the poem arises from the poet's sensibilities about the loss of a way of life, which the forefathers would not be able to experience anymore since they are "forever laid" in the country churchyard and which the poet will not be able to see anymore because they remain in obscurity only in the "short and simple annals of the poor". While grieving over the loss of pastoral life, the poet finds consolation in the very obscurity that his forefathers have been left to repose. According to Hough, a renowned critic, obscurity has its own advantages, in which "the narrow lot of the villagers circumscribed not only potential virtues, but also potential crimes — forbade them the brutality of a conqueror or the venality of a court poet". [25] Hence, the poet finds consolation for the "madding crowd's ignoble strife" in the obscure life of the villagers. In a way this also acts as a defence against the alteration to life caused by death. Sacks elaborates on this by saying that "Gray marshals a defence of obscurity at large [by] revealing it as the necessary condition of the dead. His praise seems to extend, therefore, to those who live in such a way — obscure and silent — as to suffer the least alteration by death. Hence, too, "they kept the noiseless tenor of their way".[26]

As to the poet's own "sense of waste and frustration, which no longer appears as personal inadequacy, but as part of what must inevitably happen in all human life and all nature", [27] the reflection of

his personal anguish — his death and the waste that his poetic talent will succumb to — as an inevitable natural event enables him "to bear his own disappointments by seeing them in the wider setting of which they are a part". However, this effort in looking for consolation in the poet's own protracted anguish is not complete since humans will still have to resign themselves to the possibility of waste and death. The real consolation comes with a realisation that the final solution to such inequities and problems lay outside the realm of human contemplation. According to Gray himself, this force is God who, alone makes the final judgement and who can also make right all the wrong, either committed by humans or a result of natural injustice. Subsequently, the poet wishes to be left in peace on the lap of mother earth and in the hands of his God as the Epitaph writes:

> No further seek his merits to disclose,
> Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
> (There they alike in trembling hope repose,)
> The bosom of his Father and his God.
>
> ("Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard")

It is also in the epitaph that Gray's desire to be remembered is fulfilled. But the final resolution does not rest so much in erecting a tombstone as in the script inscribed on it. This means that for the poet language is the only guarantee of remembrance and one that can assure the

immortality of his identity. From the above discussion it may be reiterated that the poem, although lacking the characteristic of a traditional elegy, is primarily elegiac in nature as it mourns the death of an age and the poet's own sense of waste and death. The poem, however, has adapted well to the conventions of pastoral imagery, the deliberation on grief and the movement from such grief to consolation and remembrance, in spite of its marked departure from the traditional elegy in its treatment of the theme.

The movement of the unconventional elegy away from its predecessor has broadened the scope for further modifications, which in turn constitute the modern tendencies that Ramazani talks about in his book, Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney. In this book, Ramazani defines the scope of the modern elegy that it "permeates a wide range of poems about war, love, race gender, meditation, the self, the family, and the poet".[28] He elaborates that "the poetry of mourning for the dead assumes in the modern period an extraordinary diversity and range, incorporating more anger and scepticism, more conflict and anxiety than ever before". (POM p. 1) As a result, one major distinction between the modern elegists and their predecessors is that they "tend to enact the work not of normative but of 'melancholic' mourning – a term I adapt from Freud to distinguish mourning that is unresolved, violent, and ambivalent". (POM p. 4)

They attack the dead and the self, their work and tradition and they discard such traditional ideas of consolation as rebirth of the dead in nature, in God, or in poetry itself. He further adds, "...modern elegists 'practise losing farther, losing faster', so that the 'One Art' of the modern elegy is not transcendence or redemption of loss but immersion in it". (POM p. 4)

However, despite the marked change in the mood of the modern elegist; Ramazani notices the use of a number of "ancient elegiac tropes, structures, and even consolations" in modern elegies. At the same time, this incorporation of traditional conventions into the modern context of the elegy is not without any conscious effort at sifting, or violating its norms and even at times trespassing its limits. In the words of Ramazani:

> They conjoin the elegiac with the anti-elegiac, at once appropriating and resisting the traditional psychology, structure, and imagery of the genre. The apparent oxymoronic term "modern elegy" suggests both the negation of received codes ('modern') and their perpetuation ('elegy') – a synthesis of modernity and inheritance that is especially fruitful for the poets like Hardy, Stevens, Hughes, and Plath, who neither rehash nor neglect literary traditions. (POM p. 12)

The modern elegists not only rebel against set norms of the traditional elegy but simultaneously regain them through rebellion. Hence, "the modern elegy more radically violates previous generic

norms than did earlier phases of elegy: it becomes anti-consolatory and anti-encomiastic, anti-Romantic and anti-Victorian, anti-conventional and sometimes even anti-literary". (POM pp. 1-2)

Thus it has been seen that the elegy as a genre has not remained static but has evolved with the times, has broadened its range and even changed the contours of its movement, which had traditionally progressed from praise, to lament and consolation. These evolutions should prove useful in examining Requiem as an elegy.

Endnotes

[1] See Sharon M. Bailey, "An Elegy for Russia: Akhmatova's Requiem", The Slavic and East European Journal Vol. 43, No. 2 (1999) 325.

[2] See Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, "Hiraeth, Soso Tham and the Elegiac Tradition", Hiraeth and the Poetry of Soso Tham (A Study of Tham's Major Poem, Ki Sngi Ba Rim U Hynniew Trep and Related Poems), diss., North-Eastern Hill University, 2005, 32. The dissertation has based this definition on the following books:

a. Chris Baldick, The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 66-7.

b. M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms 7th Edition (New Delhi: Harcourt India Private Limited, 1999) 72-3.

c. Peter M. Sacks, The English Elegy Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1985) 1-37.

d. Jahan Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) ix-xv, 1-31.

e. S. P. Sen Gupta, ed., Mathew Arnold Selected Poems (Bombay: Orient Longman Limited, 1979) 1-6.

[3] See Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, "Hiraeth, Soso Tham and the Elegiac Tradition", Hiraeth and the Poetry of Soso Tham (A Study of Tham's Major Poem, Ki Sngi Ba Rim U Hynniew Trep and Related Poems), diss., North-Eastern Hill University, 2005. 2.

[4] See C. Hugh Holman, A Handbook to Literature, 4th Edition (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1980) 151.

[5] See 2c above.

[6] See 4 above. 321.

[7] See 3 above.

[8] See 2c above. 20-1.

[9] Ibid. 21.

[10] Ibid. 22.

[11] Ibid. 20.

[12] From Ovid's Metamorphoses as appeared in Sacks'. 4.

[13] Ibid.

[14] See 2c above. 26-7.

[15] See Homer, Iliad trans., Alexander Pope, in The Poems of Alexander Pope, ed. John Butt, Vol. 7 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) 334.

[16] See James Holly Hanford, "The Pastoral Elegy and Milton's Lycidas", PMLA Vol. 25, No. 3 (1910) 408.

[17] See C. T. Thomas ed., "Lycidas and Pastoral Elegy", Lycidas (Mumbai: Orient Longman Ltd., 1975) 39.

[18] See 3 above. 3.

[19] Ibid.

[20] See 1 above. 328.

[21] See 3 above.

[22] See 2d above. 226.

[23] See Sacks, "Jonson, Dryden, and Gray". Details as 2c above. 133.

[24] Ibid.

[25] See Graham Hough, "Gray", The Romantic Poets (n.s.: Hutchinson University Library, n.d.) 9-24.

[26] See 23 above. 135.

[27] See 25 above. 15.

[28] See 2d above. The quotations thereafter are taken from the same source.

Chapter III

Requiem and the Elegiac Mode

In the introductory chapter a statement has been made by Sharon M. Bailey, which refers to Requiem as an "elegy for Russia". This reference to the poem as an elegy remains a problem that requires an in depth analysis of it as a poem of mourning. But any attempt at solving this problem would be inadequate without a proper understanding of the definitions of the elegy and the use of its conventions. This is the reason why in the preceding chapter a discussion of the elegy, its definitions, conventions and modern tendencies has been made. This chapter will make use of these definitions and conventions to study the nature of Requiem as a poem of mourning with a view to establishing it as an elegy. In the process the chapter will also examine how the definitions and conventions are followed or modified.

As has been discussed in chapter two the traditional definition of the elegy is as "an elaborately formal lyric poem lamenting the death of a friend or public figure. It is characterized by a powerful intertwining of emotion and rhetoric, of loss and figuration, and above all by the movement from mourning to consolation". Further, the "loss" that the elegy laments refers specifically to mortal loss. If such is the traditional elegy, at first glance, Requiem would seem to have little in common with either a requiem (Mass for the Dead) or an elegy

for Akhmatova's son, Lev Gumilev, for which the poem, among others, mourns had been merely arrested and was not dead at the time. This can be seen in the first introduction of the poem, "By Way of a Preface", where Akhmatova divulges that she "spent seventeen months in the prison queues in Leningrad" waiting for news about the fate of her imprisoned son. Therefore, if the poem does not even fulfil the requirements of a personal elegy in the traditional sense of the term, it is all the more reason why the reference to it as an "elegy for Russia" by critics such as Sharon M. Bailey, Joseph Brodsky and Sam Driver should be examined.

As described in the first chapter, Requiem is a complex cycle of fifteen poems with one prose paragraph. It consists of an epigraph, three introductions and ten poems organized according to their themes. The poems document the arrest and sentencing of her son, along with thousands other men, and the periods of intense "grief, denial, incomprehension, and withdrawal" [1] experienced by the poet as she awaited his uncertain fate. A two-part 'Epilogue' closes the cycle, reflecting Akhmatova's reaction to the destructive nature of the Terror of the Stalinist reign and a wish to expose that Terror. From the above description it is seen that the poem is occasioned by the arrest of the son, along with thousands others. As mentioned above, the poem indeed has little in common with an elegy for it mourns not the death

but the arrest of the son. If this is the case, the obvious question that comes to mind is why a poem mourning the arrest of the son should be called an elegy. A brief look at the events will shed some more light on the question above as well as on the significance of the arrests during that reign of terror. Deliberating on the implication of the word 'arrest', Sharon M. Bailey explains that "for a vast number of victims of the Terror, arrest resulted in death, whether immediately by execution or slowly in Siberia so that it might be assumed that the one leads directly to the other". [2] As Bailey has pointed out, therefore, arrest in those years of terror could easily be equated with death and this is one reason why critics have referred to Requiem in elegiac terms. But although a correlation has been made between arrest and death, it still remains, in Bailey's own words, an assumption. Therefore, in order to validate this assumption, it is necessary to look for textual evidence and to see whether the correlation is present or not within the text.

In doing so, it can be seen that references to death are indeed present throughout the cycle of poems. For example, in "Prelude" the poem suggests the presence of death in the images of:

> Stars of death stood above us, and Russia,
>
> In her innocence, twisted in pain
>
> Under blood-spattered boots

The "Stars" here hang as ominous signs of impending death. Again in Poem I the first two lines allude to the time when the Secret police took her husband, Nikolai Gumilev, and shortly after executed him: "It was dawn when they took you. I followed / As a widow walks after the bier". This reference to her husband's execution in the above lines, although the incident took place almost a decade before Akhmatova wrote the poem, is supported by the second poem, which speaks of the "Husband buried, then to see / Son arrested". Akhmatova's sense of loss here for both husband and son is acute even though she was not present to witness the arrest or the execution of her husband. There is an ambiguity in the pronoun "you" in the line "It was dawn when they took you". The correlation between death and arrest is clearly there for Akhmatova, which may also be referred to the son and his arrest along with Nikolai Punin in 1938 and towards the end of the poem a reference to death is made with the help of an allusion to the wives of the Streltsy [3] who wail the death of their husbands as now Akhmatova wails for her son: "Like the wives of the Streltsy, now I come / To wail under the Kremlin's gaunt towers". Similarly, the final lines in poem '8', "And the glint of those beloved eyes/ Conceals the last, the final horror" have been considered as a veneration to Osip Mandelstam who was kept in a camp near Vladivostok and whose death was heard rumoured in 1939. Here the "beloved eyes" could also be seen as those

of the son's so that Mandelstam's death is brought to bear upon the son's own fate. These indirect references to death, found in diffused images such as the ominous "Stars of death" or in the image of the widow and the wives of the Streltsy, and in the allusions to the death and execution of Osip Mandelstam and Nikolai Gumilev indicate that the poet is very much aware of the looming threat of death that follows arrest.

Apart from these indirect references to impending death, Akhmatova also employs what Sharon M. Bailey terms as "aesthetic euphemism" or poetic vagueness to embrace the idea of death in her poem. What the poet does is that she leaves certain lines unfinished so that the outcome is left to the reader for interpretation. For example, in the last line of poem '2' there is a missing link as to what happens to the son after his arrest: "Husband buried, then to see / Son arrested...". However, the proximity of the line describing the husband's death to the line mentioning the son's arrest augurs a horrific fate for the son. Similarly, in poem '4' the executions that take place inside the prison are indicated by the missing lines:

> There the poplar, used to imprisonment,
>
> Sways aloft. Not a sound. But think
>
> Of the numbers rotting there, innocent...

With the prisoners dehumanised as numbers, rotting away Akhmatova suggests that imprisonment is a prelude to death for those arrested.

So far the discussion has centred on the sense of impending death for those arrested. But a closer study of Requiem reveals that death does not remain only a possibility as a result of arrest. The horrific living conditions of the times are such that even life for the people, especially for the thousands of women who have lost either their sons or husbands, has acquired the horribleness of death. In "Dedication" the poet reveals a state of existence as "more lifeless than the dead". This state of lifelessness that has reduced the women sufferers to the status of a "shadow in the gloom" (poem '2') has become so unbearable that in contrast to it, actual physical death is considered desirable. The first lines of "Prelude" serve as a prime example to the above: "It was when no one smiled any longer / Save the dead, who were glad of release". Life was so terrifying during those times that death is seen as a blessing and a release from the horror of living. Thus, although death is not involved directly in the poem, it is used as a "foil or as a background against which the experiences of the poet and her son are projected".[4] However, despite the poet's presentation of death as a recurrent theme against which the experiences of the mother and the arrest of her son are reflected, the

question remains whether a poem composed on the occasion of arrest could be called an elegy.

It is in the attempt to answer this question that the definition of the unconventional elegy as a poem "of serious reflection on a solemn subject or the tragic aspects of life...having a deep pervasive tone of melancholy reflection on life's transience and its sorrows" (Chapter II p. 38) would be of paramount importance. In the light of this definition, it may be seen that, "despite the lack of funeral or eulogistic elements", [5] yet the sense of loss and despair, which is not merely personal but universal, is strongly felt by the poet. Since the sense of loss is very strongly felt in the poem it is important to recognise the fact that "mourning is necessitated not so much by death as by the loss, and that it is the sudden absence of a loved one that is the cause of grief" [6] in the elegy. Speaking more on the subject of loss, Peter Sacks states that "an elegist's language emerges from, and reacts upon, an originating sense of loss".[7] Eric Smith further elaborates that the elegy is a poem about "what is missing and also about what is more certainly known to have been formerly possessed".[8] Bailey adds that "while an elegy may be (and usually is) occasioned by death, it is more accurately defined as a poem about loss".[9] If apart from its traditional definition, the elegy is also regarded as a poem about loss then it would seem that Requiem falls under this classification since mourning in the

poem arises from the sense of loss experienced by the poet in the arrest and subsequent exile of the son.

Moreover, with the shifting of the focus of the elegy from death to loss the mourner now occupies a central place while the deceased or the arrested in the case of Requiem is present only by his absence as a point of reference. This is apparent even in the epigraph where Akhmatova talks about her presence as witness and victim during the atrocities perpetuated on the Russian people: "I was with my people then, / There, where my people, unfortunately, were". It is because of this emphasis on the mourner over the deceased that the theme of loss in Requiem acquires additional significance. As Akhmatova mourns the loss of her son she is also grieving the discontinuity between her own sense of the past and the present state she is thrown into. In fact, the ten major poems in the cycle refer to the various stages of grief the poet undergoes. For instance, in poem '4' the poet speaks of her youth as the "gay sinner of Tsarkoe Selo" and in Epilogue II she makes a reference to her childhood "by the sea, where I entered this world", all of which is now lost in her present despair as she "stand at the Crosses, three-hundreth / In the queue, each bleak New Year". It may be noted that this despair over the disruption of the poet's own sense of continuity and order in her life is more than just an extension of the loss brought about by the arrest of and subsequent detachment from her

son. In Requiem, suffering for the poet is very real and this is seen in the uncertainty, helplessness and sorrow that accompany the poet and the women after the arrest of their loved ones and makes life outside the prison as intolerable as that of imprisonment. But this is not all that the women experience. Similar to the isolation of the imprisoned, the women are also isolated from the rest of the world shown in the lack of "social qualities, such as speech and identity, and physical qualities, such as warmth and breath".[10] The lack or the loss of such human qualities can be seen throughout the poem. In "By Way of a Preface" the woman in the queue even to whisper a question to the poet, has to rouse herself out of the "torpor common to us all". In "Dedication" the isolation is felt more intensely as each woman has to deal with her own suffering and grief, "Cut off from the world, quite on her own, / Heart reduced to shreds...She staggers on her way...Alone". Elsewhere in the poem the sense of isolation is seen as in "this woman, sick, at home, / Sees this woman, all alone" (poem '2'). In poem '10', "Crucifixion", the "Mother stood in silence, / No one durst so much as lift their eyes". Isolated and unable to communicate with one another, the women can only express their grief by wailing like "the wives of the Streltsy" (poem '1') or like Magdalene in poem '10', "Crucifixion".

In addition to being isolated and lacking the ability of speech, the women are also seen as lacking complete human physical qualities.

In "By Way of a Preface" the woman is described only in terms of lips "blue with cold". In Epilogue I dishevelled images of body parts are seen:

> How cheeks, carved out of suffering and of sorrow,
> Take on lines of rough cuneiform scripts.
> How heads of curls, but lately black or ashen,
> Turn suddenly to silver overnight,
> Smiles fade on lips reduced to dread submission

Such descriptions of the women reflect on the loss of individuality and the state of lifeless existence that they are forced to lead. This is also the loss that the poem mourns, which is summarised in Bailey's statement that, "*Requiem* is an elegy written on the occasion of the arrest of the son and the subsequent 'living death' of the mother".[11]

But the poem does not only mourn the loss of the son or the mother's own "living death". In fact, Akhmatova universalises her own personal loss and grief so that the poem in representing the suffering of the thousands of Russian women who shared the poet's own predicament of loss and grief mourns the tragic fate of an entire nation at the hands of the Stalinist regime.

Therefore, the initial loss experienced by the poet in the arrest of her son has been compounded with the loss of her own sense of continuity with the past and order in her life and made more intense by

its universality as it is shared by thousands of women across Russia who in turn mourned the arrest and death of their husbands and sons as well as the horror of their own living condition. As such the element of loss is seen as the source of mourning and melancholy in Requiem and as it has been shown even the element of death is also central to its theme. It is because of this that in spite of the absence of funeral and eulogistic elements Requiem has been considered by many as an elegy belonging to the unconventional category. That it is "an elegy for Russia" is because the poem does not only mourn personal loss but the tragedy of an entire nation.

The view of Requiem as an elegy, especially in the unconventional sense, will become even more clearly defined if the use of elegiac conventions, how they have been accommodated or modified, in the poem is examined. The most inherent convention of the elegy is the pastoral contextualisation, which is the representation of the dead friend as a shepherd to be mourned by the natural world with its apostrophe and pathetic fallacy. In the preceding chapter is has been seen that this contextualisation includes other conventions such as,

> the myth of the vegetation deity; the use of repetitions and refrains; the reiterated questioning and the outbreak of vengeful anger or denunciation; the procession of mourners; the passage from grief to

> consolation and the traditional images of resurrection, transfiguration, stellification and deification. Additional conventions can also be seen in the use of the images of flowers and light, the eclogic division within or between mourning voices, the question of contests, rewards, and inheritance, and the unusual degree of self-consciousness regarding the actual performance of mourning. This last feature relates to the need of the elegist to draw attention to his own surviving powers with a view to consoling himself. (Chapter II p. 29)

Of these the most prominent is the convention of the pathetic fallacy. As Sacks observes, this convention has its roots in the figure of the vegetation god. The purpose of the personification of the vegetation god as human or human-divine is to establish a unity between man and nature so that the mourner can focus his grief on one object only. The other feature, which is more relevant to the poem, is the creation of a fiction where man is seen to control nature and its changes as nature is made to mourn and partake in his grief. In other words the withering of nature is not the cause of man's grief, rather nature becomes the externalisation of his sorrow. Speaking on this topic, Bailey quotes Lambert that, "Nature is made culpable, is made to suffer, is made to sympathize".[12] In Requiem a direct and clear example of this is seen in the first two lines of "Dedication": "Mountains bow beneath that boundless sorrow, / And the mighty river stops its flow". Here the state

of affairs of Stalinist Russia with its mass arrests, exiles, executions and purges is so horrific that the natural outcome was wide spread. The sorrow was so pervasive and so overwhelming that the poet says even the mountains bow beneath it and even the "mighty river" ceases its natural flow just as life and all its normal activity for the people in Russia comes to a standstill. Similarly, in poem '4', "the poplar, used to imprisonment, / Sways aloft. Not a sound" as if mourning in deep silence the tortures and executions carried out inside the prisons. But apart from the examples listed above, the element of the pathetic fallacy in Requiem is far more encompassing.

It is not only nature that is made to mourn but even the man-made city and the nation as a whole is made to participate in grief as if to emphasise the fact that the loss experienced is not natural but man-made. It is seen in the poem that the loss (and subsequent death) is brought about by arrests, exile and executions, which are the works of man and therefore, the city and the nation — symbols of man-made institutions — are also seen to mourn the loss of the son and thousands others. For instance, in "Prelude" Leningrad is seen "dangled, incongruous" as many buildings are converted into prisons and the city turns into a lifeless entity and mourns the loss of social warmth. In fact, the entire nation is dragged to partake in the sorrow. In the same poem Russia,

In her innocence, twisted in pain

Under Blood-spattered boots, and the shudder

Of the Black Marias in their train.

The nation is seen to be reeling in pain, under the heavy boots of soldiers and the shudder of trains as they convey the prisoners to their death.

In addition, it is not only the city or the nation that is implicated in grief, but even the "cultural self-identity" of Russia suffers. This may be understood more clearly with the help of the following observation. Susan Amert shows how in "Dedication" Akhmatova parodies Lebedev Kumach's "Song of the Motherland" in an attempt to portray the defiled cultural identity of Russia. Kumach's song reads as follows: "We love our motherland like a bride, / We cherish it like an affectionate mother". In the last section of "Dedication", Akhmatova speaks about a mother as "She staggers on her way...Alone". According to Susan Amert, the allusion of this line to Kumach's poem bears allegorical connotations — seeing the mother as mother Russia — but a mother who has been violated and defiled, a mother who staggers away in pain and alone. She observes that "On the symbolical level of Lebedev Kumach's "bride" and "affectionate mother", Akhmatova is imagining the murder and rape of the motherland".[13] Therefore, in juxtaposing Akhmatova's "Dedication" and Kumach's

"Song of the Motherland" the suffering of the woman is reflective of the suffering of a culture as a whole.

On the convention of the pathetic fallacy, Eric Smith, a prominent critic on the elegy, says that the pathetic fallacy assumes the role to help accomplish a human need in establishing a bond between man and nature to make up for the "essential loneliness of man in the face of forces which appear to make a mockery of all that he holds valuable".[14] However, in Requiem the city and nation, both symbolical of social and political structures, once believed to have nurtured and protected the individual's well being have now become the very instruments used by Stalin in subjugating and undermining the freedom of the victims and the survivors. It is in this context that even these institutions are seen to mourn the grief and despair of the women and all Russia.

The intense sorrow felt by the poet and the absence of the means of redress leads her to display anger and rage. According to this elegiac convention, the display of anger represents the poet's attempt at cursing death and the change brought about by it. In poem '8', "To Death", Akhmatova expresses her anger and rage against death, life and the government. In her rage against the anguish and torment of life, she calls on death saying, "You'll come in any case — then why not right away?". But death does not come as the poet wishes and

therefore, she nurtures anger towards death too and she taunts it by asking it to

> choose any guise you like: Burst in on me,
>
> A shell with poison-gas container,
>
> Or, bandit with a heavy weight, creep up on me.

As the poet vents her anger towards death, she becomes aware of the degenerating change that has taken place in her as "life has dragged me under" and in turn develops a more acute bitterness towards this change. Hence, the display of anger in the poem is against life, death and change in keeping with the elegiac convention.

But life, death and change are not the only things attacked by Akhmatova. In a mode highly resonant of John Milton's "Lycidas" and its attack on the corruption and ugliness of the times, the poet also lashes out at the Stalinist regime for the atrocities it has committed on the people of Russia. The "shell with poison-gas container", the "bandit with a heavy weight" and the "typhus vapour", besides expressing the poet's anger also allude to the various ways and means used by the government to accomplish its cruel acts of terror.

Usually the display of anger is followed by the convention of questioning so as to "set free the energy locked in grief and rage and to organize its movement in the form of a question that is not merely an expression of ignorance but a voicing of protest". [15] This convention

also serves as a "therapeutic ritual, in which the mourner shifts the attention away from the object of loss or himself to the world outside and stops him from becoming completely ensnared in melancholia".[16] In Requiem the poet uses the convention to express her longing to know about the fate of her "friends" and those of the imprisoned:

> Where are now the friends of my misfortune,
> Those that shared my own two years of hell?
> What do the Siberian snow-winds caution,
> What bodes the moon circle for their fortunes?
>
> ("Dedication")

In the longing to know about their fate, there is also a deep desire in the poet to be connected with those people. In her ignorance about their whereabouts the poet protests the prevailing conditions of the time that has kept them apart and has shrouded their destiny in darkness.

Since the start of the Stalin reign of terror, interaction and communication between individuals had virtually ceased — people were afraid to talk to one another for fear of being denounced; mothers were separated from their sons, wives from their husbands, art and literature had come under the scanner of the Soviet government so that the freedom to write had been all but denied. In contrast to this the poet through the convention of questioning expresses her will to communicate and not be left in ignorance, engrossed in her own grief.

This attempt to channelize her thoughts away from her son and her own grief to the outside world is a desire to share the burden of grief with others and thus save herself from being overwhelmed by it. Moreover, as observed earlier, the poet's longing to revive the connection with her fellow sufferers can be seen as an indirect protest against the dehumanising acts of the Soviet regime to destroy any form of social contact.

Subsequently, as is in the last line of the poem "Dedication", the poet extends her greeting and farewell to her fellow sufferers: "Theirs be this, my greeting and farewell". The poet may not be able to see or meet them anymore, therefore, the only means of communication is through her poetry, which she hopes will ease their suffering and pain. Thus, in the use of this convention Akhmatova seems not only to have followed established traditions but to have extended it to apply to the consolation of, not merely herself, but also her fellow sufferers.

It has been seen that Akhmatova, through her poem not only hopes to touch a far wider audience, which includes the thousands of women scattered across the nation but that she also intends to expose the terror so that people across continents would come to know about it. This leads to a discussion of another important convention of the elegy and that is the "thematic universality to which the elegy should appeal".[17] Peter Sacks stresses the value of generic convention to the

universal appeal of an effective elegy. He questions, "How many elegies console more readers than the poet, the particular bereaved, and their immediate circle?" [18] Bailey makes a defence that Requiem does appeal to the readers in more ways than one. Firstly, Akhmatova invites the reader to place himself/herself within the framework of the poem. In "By Way of a Preface" she narrates the setting of the poem: "In the terrible years of the Yezhovchina [19], I spent seventeen months in the prison queues in Leningrad". On reading this, the reader becomes aware of the place and is drawn to imagine it. Secondly, in Epilogue I the poet "learned how faces droop and then grow hollow" and in turn invites the reader to learn the reason behind those drooping faces from her. By learning about the atrocities and the grief experienced by the suffering women, the reader is able to gather that the grief is not that of the poet alone but of an entire nation. This in turn will appeal to the readers' universal sentiment of grief.

Apart from reaching out to her readers and inviting them to witness her grief, Akhmatova makes it very clear right from the beginning that she speaks on behalf of the thousands of other women who shared the experiences of the poet but were unable to communicate on their own. In "By Way of a Preface" a woman asks "— And could you describe this?" to which Akhmatova answered "I can". By speaking for the people she transforms her personal

experience of grief into a national and cultural outpouring of sorrow and despair. Again in Epilogue I Akhmatova vividly reveals that "I pray, not for myself alone, my cry/ Goes up for all those with me there — for all".

As she speaks and prays "for all", she also reflects upon the possibility that what happened to her and her son may and most certainly did happen to countless others. History records that over forty million Russians became victims of the Stalin purges. Hence, the "convict's burrow" in "Dedication", the "long lines of the newly condemned" in "Prelude", the "friends of my misfortune" in "Dedication" — referring to the women suffering the same predicament — all reflect the "state of torpor common to us all" ("By Way of a Preface").

Furthermore, the parody of Kumach's "Song of the Motherland" by Akhmatova in "Dedication", when looked at in the context of its allegorical implications can also help in the purpose of highlighting the thematic universality in Requiem. The lines of the poem runs:

> Someone, somewhere, feels the cool wind, bracing,
>
> Sees the sun go nestling down to rest –
>
> We know nothing, we, together facing
>
> Still the sickening clank of keys, the pacing

Of the sentries with their heavy steps.

("Dedication")

In the poem, Akhmatova substitutes the word "someone" for Kumach's "Over the country" to emphasise the fact that the Stalin government was only good to a few. In doing so, she conversely refers to the majority of the population who suffered under the Regime. In the lines that follow Kumach's parody the collective pronoun "we" is used to denote the majority of the population who "know nothing" except for the "sickening clank of keys" in the prisons. But the "we, together" here, may not only include the thousand of mothers enveloped in grief but may also embrace the suffering of prisoners. Thus, the poet is able to universalise the sense of suffering and grief, attributing it to both the mothers and the prisoners by highlighting the similar experiences of those outside and those inside the prison walls.

Akhmatova also makes references to her husband's death, the death of Nikolai Punin and that of Osip Mandelstam. This point to the fact that even in her most intimate experiences of losing both husband and son, she is not free from associating them with the tragedy befallen other close associates. The extent of the universality in the poem also stretches into the history of Russian tradition and culture. It has been seen earlier that poem '1' speaks of the "wives of the Streltsy" and Akhmatova likens her wailing to theirs: "Like the wives of the Streltsy,

now I come / To wail under the Kremlin's gaunt towers". Looking back at history, after the revolt in 1698, Peter the Great had thousands of Musketeers (elite military corps instituted by Ivan the Terrible) executed. Their wives pleaded for them under the Kremlin towers. By referring to the wives of the Streltsy in poem '1', Akhmatova brings to light a Russian history, which is steeped in oppression and suffering, a tradition of cruelty and pain, and at once stretches the boundaries of the convention to also cover the history of suffering in the country.

Another aspect, which has helped in establishing the universal appeal of the poem is how Akhmatova has been able to speak through the voices of different assumed personas — sometimes as a lonely grieving mother and at other times as someone part of a larger group of mourning women, with the easy transition from 'I' to 'she' to 'we' and then to 'those'. The change of the pronoun 'I' in "By Way of a Preface" to "we" in "Dedication" implies that the poet not only speaks about her own loss and sorrow but, as stated earlier, about the grief of the other suffering women. Then, in poem '7', "Sentence", allusions are made to the arrest of her son and she refers to the incident in the singular pronoun 'I':

> And the word in stone has fallen heavy
> On my breast...I was ready,
> I shall get along somehow.

It is believed that the son was arrested along with thousands others and therefore the use of the pronoun 'I' shifts to "she" in "Dedication", which may refer to Akhmatova herself or another woman suffering the same predicament: "Just as if some lout had sent her sprawling, / Still...She staggers on her way...". This sort of transition allows the poet to take up multiple voices whether it is an experience of personal loss or being part of a collective suffering experienced by thousands of Russians all over the country. On the subject Anna L. Crone observes, "In no work does Akhmatova merge with the nation and set herself apart from it so many times".[20] Thus, the personal becomes the universal and the universal becomes the personal. Bailey further states, "A poem about one death becomes a meditation on mutability and mortality. For Akhmatova, the arrest of her son becomes the starting point for a meditation on the pain and suffering caused by the arrests of those arrested, and even more importantly, for the families left behind...to include all these individuals under the rubric of son and mother".[21]

This transition of the poet from the personal to the universal and back by putting on the garb of multiple identities leads to yet another important convention, that of the division of the mourning voices. The voices usually form a distinction between the mourners or a distinction within the mourner himself/herself. In the case of Requiem the division

is within the poet herself and is formulated through two voices — that of the poet's and of the other women's. An example of this division is seen in the transition from 'I' to 'we' in two poems. In "By Way of a Preface" the poet relates her experience of waiting for news about the fate of her son: "In the terrible years of the Yezhovchina, I spent seventeen months in the prison queues in Leningrad", and in the next poem "Dedication", the personal voice changes to a collective mourning: "We'd rise, as for early Mass, each morning, / Cross the callous city, wend our way:...". It is seen earlier that the change from the personal "I" to the collective "we" helps to universalise the theme of grief in the poem.

In addition to this as observed in the earlier chapter, the purpose of such divisions in the mourning voice is also to show the "splitting and self-suppression inside the mourner that accompanies the first experience of loss". Such suppression of grief is seen in the poet's attempt to transfer the tragedy by alluding it to another person's suffering. For instance, Akhmatova speaks of how the arrest and sentencing have taken a heavy toll on another woman:

> Cut off from the world, quite on her own,
>
> Heart reduced to shreds, and almost falling,
>
> Just as if some lout had sent her sprawling,

Still...She staggers on her way...Alone...

("Dedication")

But this attempt to transfer the tragedy to another person is not the only thing that Akhmatova tries to do in Requiem. In a novel use of the convention she not only suppresses her grief but even tries to deny the existence of tragedy completely. This can be seen in poem '2': "No, this is not me, this is somebody else that suffers". Akhmatova's attempt to deny the tragedy is also seen as an act of confrontation of the tragedy, which is an important aspect in the movement of the elegy from grief to consolation, which is a more enduring purpose of all elegies.

In Requiem, the major portion of the cycle reveals a strong activity of mourning and expression of sorrow. With the exception of the two-part Epilogue, in all the ten poems, the poet makes no effort in muting or avoiding her sense of grief. In fact, there is no sign of movement from sorrow to consolation in these ten poems as the poet passes through the varying degrees of grief. Writing on the subject, Therese A. Rando outlines the grieving process in an elegy. According to her, there are three stages of grief: avoidance, confrontation and reestablishment. She observes that the poet in Requiem goes through these three stages twice over, "once after the arrest, portrayed in poem I, and the second time after the sentencing in poem VII".[22] The first

stage is characterised by shock and denial. Shock arises from the sudden severance of the mourner from the object of mourning, an inability to rationalise the event of the separation. In poem '1' — "It was dawn when they took you, I followed, / As a widow walks after the bier" — the automated action of the widow following the dead body indicates that the poet is wrapped in a trance-state and has no control over her mechanical actions. Bailey elaborates that the bereaved "may carry out social obligations (making funeral arrangements, etc.) while emotionally denying the loss".[23] Similarly, in poem '7', "Sentence", the poet after hearing the sentencing of her son goes into another state of shock, which hits her like a stone: "And the word in stone has fallen heavy / On my breast". The initial shock then transmutes into disbelief and denial. The mourner may be unable or may not wish to accept the loss as seen in poem '3': "No, this is not me, this is somebody else who suffers. / I could never face that, and all that has happened".

In the second stage, Rando observes that the poet goes through a series of extreme emotions — anger, depression, musings on suicide, excessive meditation on the deceased, disorientation and insanity. These various emotions are found in most of the ten major poems in the cycle. In poem '8', "To Death", the poet expresses anger at the government for its atrocities and arbitrary actions. In her anger against

the ugly realities of the day she anticipates death as a form of escape saying, "You'll come in any case – then why not right away? / I'm waiting – life has dragged me under". Not only is her anger intended at the government and the ugly realities but also at death itself. She urges death:

> choose any guise you like: Burst in on me,
>
> A shell with poison-gas container,
>
> Or, bandit with a heavy weight...Or poison me with typhus vapour".
>
> ("To Death")

From anger, in poem '2', the poet undergoes a phase of depression and is unable to sleep (one of the symptoms of depression). In her insomniac state she sees the "Yellow moon looks quietly on,...looks in the room" where the poet cringes in distress. Withdrawal and feelings of helplessness follow and can be seen plaguing the poet and only the moon "Sees this woman, sick, at home, / Sees this woman, all alone". The poet feels helpless as her husband was buried and her son was arrested. It becomes more than she could possibly bear and in this state of helplessness she pleads for someone to "Pray for me". It is in her depression that the poet experiences a sense of "spatial disorientation" as Bailey puts it. This comes out strongly in poem '4' where, from a reference to herself as the youthful "gay sinner of Tsarkoe Selo" she is suddenly pitted against the harsh reality to "stand at the Crosses, three-

hundredth / In the queue, each bleak New Year". The deep chasm between the poet's joyful past and the present misery bewilders her and in poem '5' she becomes confused and is unable to recognise things. As if blurred by her own sorrow:

> My mind's mixed up for good, and I'm
> No longer even clear
> Who's man, who's beast, nor how much time
> Before the end draws near.
>
> (poem '5')

The confusion in her mind extends even to her lack of placement and direction. The city becomes fragmented in front of her as she could see,

> only flowers decked with dust,
> And censers ringing, footprints thrust
> Somewhere-nowhere, afar.
>
> (poem '5')

In this disoriented state of mind the poet hangs dangerously close to insanity. These lines from poem '9' serve as testimony: "So madness now wrapped its wings / Round half my soul and plies me, heartless". In her state of delirium the poet is also haunted by images of the past, her pleadings "on bended knee" on her son's behalf and "The day the storm broke from clear skies, / The hour spent visiting the prison". Trapped in these flashes of insane moments, the poet even feels drawn

towards death and suicide and she says: "draughts of fiery wine, begins / To lure me towards the vale of darkness".

It may be seen from the discussion that the poet reaches the bottom of her grief in poem '5' resulting from the arrest of her son and again in poem '8' as a result of his sentencing. However, at the end of each stage of grief Akhmatova is seen to recover firstly, through reconciliation in poem '6' and secondly, through acceptance in poem '10', "Crucifixion".

As the poet becomes reconciled to the reality of loss she "begins to form more accurate memories of the deceased, the intense emotions subside".[24] In poem '6' the poet experiences a mixture of "memory, sorrow and reconciliation" as seen in these lines:

> Weeks fly past in light profusion,
> How to fathom what's been done:
> How those long white nights, dear son,
> Watched you in your cell's seclusion.
> How once more they watch you there,
> Eyes like hawks' that burn right through you,
> Speak to you of death, speak to you
> Of the lofty cross you bear.

In contrast to poem '5', these lines have a relatively clearer reflection of the son's imprisonment, although the sense of grief is still very much present. As Akhmatova moves through the different degrees of

grief, she progresses from emotional breakdown as seen in poems '2' – '5' to memory and reconciliation in poem '6'. This progression, however, must not be mistaken with the movement towards consolation as the poet is still enmeshed in grief. It is only in poem '10', "Crucifixion", after another experience of emotional breakdown, in poems '7' – '9', that Akhmatova shows definite signs of accepting her loss. This acceptance comes in the form of "The angels hailed that solemn hour and stately, / The heavens dissolved in tongues of fire". The imagery of light here is significant in her acceptance of the loss as it becomes a source of energy that overcomes darkness and outlasts mortal man.

With reference to the preceding chapter, Peter Sacks notes that the convention of using the image of light has several layers of meaning. For instance, even as the effect of the light imagery in part I of "Crucifixion" raises hope of a consolation, yet, part II speaks of the people who mourn the death of Jesus — Magdalene who is seen sobbing, the disciple who is petrified and the Mother standing in silence. These biblical references could be seen as an analogy to Akhmatova's own predicament. The intense sorrow still felt by the poet here defies even the hint of resurrection in the reference to Jesus Christ, which is also supposed to be an element of consolation. It may be noted that in the traditional elegy, resurrection is an element of

consolation and that consolation is also seen in the return of the vegetation god, which "also represents the initiate's descent to and ascent from a crisis of mysterious revelation".[25] In Requiem, Akhmatova substitutes the crucifixion of Christ for the death of the vegetation god but makes no comment on His resurrection as would be expected with the return of the vegetation god so that there is no ascent from the crisis here. Hence, it may be said that in the ten poems of Requiem, the movement from mourning and grief to consolation is a very hesitant one because the poet mostly fluctuates between the varying degrees of grief.

The sense of consolation only comes towards the end in the Epilogue. The traditional concept of consolation "places the tragedy of an individual's death within a larger context that grants it reason, makes it understandable".[26] G. W. Pigman elaborates on this and says "consolation is a defense against the breakdown of an ideal of rational self-sufficiency".[27] In essence consolation helps the mourner to rationalise the tragic circumstances by placing it within the larger context and thus helps in bringing about the final resolution of grief. But in Requiem, despite the sense of consolation, there is no attempt whatsoever in rationalising the Terror and the subsequent events which followed it. This may lead some to doubt the existence of consolation in the poem. However, Bailey observes that a "successful poem

portrays the events without rationalization, preserving the memory of those who suffered, while at the same time preserving the sense of overwhelming chaos".[28] In Requiem, this is achieved in the ten central poems. Many images depict the mother's sorrow against a background of tyranny and suffering, which is reflected in the arrest of her son (and others) and a sense of impending death. In many cases the poet also wishes to put herself in her son's position, as if to preserve his suffering in her own. In poem '8', "To Death", the poet invites arrest saying, "You'll come in any case – then why not right away? / I'm waiting" and wills to be in her son's place, "So I may see the top of that blue cap, and scan / The face of the house-porter, white with terror". This correlation between the son's suffering and the mother's own as seen elsewhere in Requiem, points to the poet's wish to construct a connection between the mourner and the victim in order to preserve the memory and also prolong the separation. To prolong the separation between mourner and victim by juxtaposing the experiences of the son and the mother as one unified experience allows the poet to become the victim. This way the poet also is able to acknowledge the reality of the suffering both in memory and experience.

In a traditional elegy the act of consolation also brings with it an altered sense of perception of the object of loss. For example, it is the significance of the laurel tree which becomes a consoling substitute for

the loss of Daphne in the myth of Apollo and Daphne.[29] In Requiem, Akhmatova fails to adopt any such substitute and she does not create a new object of love to fill the void left by the loss of her son. Instead, as seen above, she interchanges her son's suffering with her own and as mentioned earlier is able to accept the reality of the suffering. Bailey further states, "*Requiem* aspires not only to immortalize the son or even the mother's love for her son, but to acknowledge the reality of the Terror in such a way that will not allow history to forget" [30] and this is the consolatory formula in Requiem. The consolation is rather in memory than resurrection, acknowledgement and acceptance than in an altered sense of perception. It is here that Requiem departs from the traditional concept of consolation.

However, consolation even in the traditional sense is not altogether absent from the poem. Bailey names three poems which serve to exhibit the poet's attempt at a final resolution of grief — "Dedication", "Prelude" and as mentioned earlier, Epilogue I. These poems differ from the ten central poems in that they do not explicitly describe the suffering of the poet. Rather they form what Bailey calls the "framing poems". The focus of these poems is to use language as a direct address to the reader and to create awareness in him of the events that take place in the cycle of ten poems. In "Dedication", the

poet presents the outline of the events starting with the arrest and imprisonment as seen in the lines:

> But those prison bolts are tried and thorough,
>
> And beyond them, every "convict's burrow" s
>
> Tells a tale of mortal woe.

This is followed by the anxious waiting of the mothers:

> We know nothing, we, together facing
>
> Still the sickening clank of keys, the pacing s
>
> Of the sentries with their heavy steps.

After the long wait, the poem speaks of the sentencing of the prisoners and the grief and isolation felt by the mother(s): "Sentenced...And at once the tears come rolling, / Cut off from the world, quite on her own, ...She staggers on her way...Alone...". The "Prelude" and Epilogue I give a brief yet clear summary of the Terror as seen from the point of view of the prisoner as well as the mother. In "Prelude" the poet describes the horror of living during the time by saying, "It was when no one smiled any longer / Save the dead, who were glad of release". Later in the poem she paints a horrendous picture of Russia, "In her innocence, twisted in pain / Under blood-spattered boots". Epilogue I describes the suffering of the women outside prison gates, which is as intense as those of the prisoners inside:

> How heads of curls, but lately black or ashen,
>
> Turn suddenly to silver overnight,

Smiles fade on lips reduced to dread submission...

As seen in these poems, the cohesive delineation of the tragic events that pervade the entire nation comes in the form of a "memorialisation of the events as they truly happened".[31] In an elegy the memorialisation of events is part of the consolatory formula and represents the poet's effort in working out a scheme of remembrance. Once the poet feels assured that the tragedy and her loss would be remembered by future generations, she begins to draw a consolation from the fact. This is how the three poems that Bailey names mark the poet's attempt at the final resolution of grief.

In "By Way of a Preface" and Epilogue II a clear strategy of defence and the will of the poet to overcome the Terror is noticed. In "By Way of a Preface", Akhmatova promises the thousands of suffering women to describe their predicament with the affirmative "I can" and at the same time offers them some form of consolation for their question "— And could you describe this?". This consolation is immediately noticed in the countenance of the woman, which changes to "something vaguely like a smile...across what once had been her face". While in "By Way of a Preface" Akhmatova promises the women a strategy of defence and a subsequent consolation in her acceptance to speak for them, in Epilogue II, the poem defines the manner and medium that the poet shall use to fulfil her promise and

thus work out the final resolution of grief. Bailey observes that in this poem "Akhmatova purposefully invokes language itself as a weapon". First of all, the faceless women in "By Way of a Preface" are given a definite identity in Epilogue II and the poet makes an effort "to remember each one by her name" and to "think of them everywhere, always, each one". The collective mass of women now stands out as individuals and more importantly, as those who have regained the power of speech. In contrast to the whispered question in "By Way of a Preface", the women in Epilogue II have recovered their verbal abilities: "And one tossed her beautiful head back when shown / Her corner, and said: "It's like being back home!". This verbal "presence", a term Sacks uses, does not only restore identity and significance to the poet and the other grieving women but also fills the void left by the absence of the victims who were executed or exiled to Siberia. Bailey elaborates that "the need to create a "presence" through language is only that much more acute when the elegy is for victims of an atrocity, since...Terror deprives the victims of the means of articulating their pain and, by isolating the women at the time and then finally scattering them, eliminates the potential audience".[32] The problem now is to re-organise this lost audience that has been scattered and left wandering.

Akhmatova solves this problem by weaving a mantle of words in order to embrace all the survivors under one rubric. This process of

weaving is another convention of the elegy, which is weaving a consolation usually accomplished at the end of the poem. In Epilogue II the poet says, "I've worked them a funeral shroud from each word / Of pain that escaped them, and I overheard". Sacks explains: "To speak of weaving a consolation recalls the actual weaving of burial clothes and shroud and this emphasizes how mourning is an action, a process of work".[33] The funeral shroud in Requiem then is also representative of the actual work of the poet in composing her cycle of poems as a work of mourning. As a work of mourning Requiem can therefore be said to be an unconventional elegy, which conforms closely to its definition as "a poem of serious reflection on a solemn subject or the tragic aspects of life...having a deep pervasive tone of melancholy reflection on life's transience and its sorrow" (Chapter II p. 38). The sorrow of the poet results from the arrest of her son, loved ones and her sense of loss, while life's transience can be seen in the execution of her husband, Nikolai Gumilev, her friend Osip Mandelstam, and in the uncertain fate of her arrested son, Lev Gumilev. But even as the poem is being seen as an unconventional elegy it also makes use, as discussed, many of the traditional elegiac conventions. While it conforms to some, it modifies others in various and unique ways as shown. But these modifications are not the same as some other modern tendencies that Jahan Ramazani talks about. In his

book Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney, Ramazani enumerates the characteristics among the modern tendencies: "the poetry of mourning for the dead assumes in the modern period an extraordinary diversity and range, incorporating more anger and scepticism, more conflict and anxiety than ever before". As a result of this, the modern elegist "tend to enact the work not of normative but of 'melancholic' mourning – a term I adapt from Freud to distinguish mourning that is unresolved, violent, and ambivalent". They attack the dead and the self, their work and tradition and they discard such traditional ideas of consolation as rebirth of the dead in nature, in God, or in poetry itself. He further adds, "...modern elegists 'practise losing farther, losing faster', so that the 'One Art' of the modern elegy is not transcendence or redemption of loss but immersion in it". As may be seen in the preceding section of the chapter, Requiem does not really share these modern tendencies. For instance, it does not attack the dead but instead ennobles them by paying homage to them and venerating their death. Moreover, in the poem the poet's grief proceeds slowly towards consolation as is seen in the memorialisation of the events as they actually happened and finally in the weaving of a "funeral shroud". Apart from weaving a funeral shroud, Akhmatova also talks about a monument erected in her memory and reveals her desire that her bronze statue be erected "here,

where they let me stand three hundred hours, / And never so much as unbolted the doors" ("Epilogue II"). But as much as the final resolution in Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" does not rest so much in erecting a tombstone as in the script inscribed on it, so can Akhmatova's Requiem, a shroud woven of words, be seen as a final resolution of grief. In this way, Akhmatova transcends her grief, is redeemed of her sense of loss and frees herself from the danger of being immersed in it.

Besides being an unconventional elegy, Requiem may also be said to be "an elegy for Russia" as many critics have maintained. Referring to Epilogue II, Bailey comments on the "funeral shroud" that Akhmatova weaves from "each word". She says the funeral shroud is: "a token of rite to those who had been executed in secret and buried without a memorial service or grave marker". This clearly indicates that Akhmatova did not compose the poem out of a sense of personal loss alone, but has taken up this task in order to speak for all the sufferers, victims and survivors of the Stalin reign of terror. Therefore, the words are not hers alone but belong to the thousands of women who in sharing the same plight as the poet have been given a voice through the poem.

Endnotes

[1] See Sharon M. Bailey, "An Elegy for Russia: Akhmatova's Requiem", The Slavic and East European Journal Vol. 43, No. 2 (1999) 324.

[2] Ibid. 325-6.

[3] See Anna Akhmatova, Requiem, ed. Walter Arndt, trans. Robin Kemball (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976). Musketeers, the first regiments of the Russian army formed in 1550 by Ivan IV. Following their revolt in 1698, Peter the Great had over one thousand of them executed and their bodies displayed in public.

[4] See 1 above. 327.

[5] Ibid. 325.

[6] Ibid. 327.

[7] See Peter Sacks, The English Elegy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985) 1.

[8] See Eric Smith, By Mourning Tongues: Studies in English Elegy (Ipswich: Boydell, 1977) 2.

[9] See 1 above. 328.

[10] Ibid. 329.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid. 334.

[13] See Susan Amert, In a Shattered Mirror: The Later Poetry of Anna Akhmatova (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992) 44-5.

[14] See 8 above. 7.

[15] See Chapter II. 29.

[16] Ibid.

[17] See 1 above. 330.

[18] See T. V. F. Brogan, Peter Sacks, and Stephen F. Fogle, "Elegy", The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, ed. Alex Preminger et al. (New York: MJF Books, 1993) 325-6.

[19] See endnote 34 in Chapter II.

[20] See Anna L. Crone, "Antimetabole in Rekviem: The Structural Disposition in Themes and Motifs", The Speech of Unknown Eyes: Akhmatova's Readers on Her Poetry Vol. 1, ed. Wendy Rosslyn (Nottingham: Astra Press, 1990) 28.

[21] See 1 above. 333.

[22] See Therese A. Rando, Grief, Dying and Death: Clinical Interventions for Caregivers (Champaign, IL: Research Press Company, 1984) 37-9.

[23] See 1 above. 337.

[24] Ibid. 338.

[25] See endnote 11 in Chapter II.

[26] See 1 above. 338.

[27] See G. W. Pigman, Grief and English Renaissance Elegy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 6.

[28] See 1 above. 339.

[29] See Chapter II. 31.

[30] See 1 above. 341.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid. 342.

[33] See 7 above. 18-9.

Chapter IV

Requiem and the Northern Elegies: A Comparison

In the previous chapter attempts have been made to study the nature of Requiem and to show how the poem fits the definition of the unconventional elegy as it too is steeped in the expression of loss and mourning, seen in the arrest and sentencing of Akhmatova's son and thousands of others like him. This sense of loss also arouses in the poet an awareness of the mutability and transience of life, intensified by the execution of her husband, Nikolai Gumilev and that of her poet friend Osip Mandelstam. In addition to this, the poem also follows many of the major conventions of the elegy, in particular the convention of the pathetic fallacy, the universality of sorrow and the movement from grief to consolation. But the study of the nature of the poem — undertaken with reference to the definitions and conventions of the elegy — would be more exhaustive if a study with some of Akhmatova's other elegies is also undertaken. This chapter, therefore, will undertake a comparison between Requiem and the Northern Elegies in order to further highlight the elegiac nature of Requiem by pointing up the similarities and differences between them.

To begin with, a brief discussion of the Northern Elegies will be done to see whether the poems fit the definitions of an elegy. The

Northern Elegies initially comprise seven "fragmentary" poems with one more addition made later, which is the even more fragmentary "Lyrical Digression on the seventh Elegy". The history of these poems has been related in the manuscript "Preface to the fragmentary "Seventh Elegy", which is preserved in the Central State Archive of Literature and Art, Moscow. In this preface Akhmatova speaks about the composition of the elegies saying:

> Soon after the end of the war I wrote two long poems in blank verse [apparently, 'I, like a river...' and 'There are three ages to memories...'] and christened them 'Leningrad elegies'. Then I joined two more poems to them ['Dostoevsky's Russia' and 'It was dreadful to live in that house']. The rest — seven of them were conceived — lived in me in different stages of readiness. One, especially['The Seventh'], was thought out up to the end and, as always, ssomething was noted down, something lost, something forgotten, something re-called, when suddenly it turned out that I loved them for their unanimity, for their total readiness to condemn me for anything they pleased [1]

As seen from the manuscript preface above, the poems, written at different stages of the poet's life, have been described by the poet herself as elegies. The First Poem ("Prehistory") was written in 1940 in Leningrad and later completed in 1943 in Tashkent. The Second Poem was also written in Tashkent but a year earlier, in 1942. The Third

Poem was composed in 1945 after Akhmatova's return to Leningrad, where she lived in a room in the Punin apartment. In 1955 when Akhmatova was in Moscow, she composed the Fifth Poem ("About the 1910's"). The Sixth, however, was composed much earlier in 1921 in Tsarkoye Selo, the same year her husband was arrested and executed. According to Akhmatova, the Seventh Poem "was thought out up to the end" when she started writing it in 1958 in Leningrad. It took her six years to complete the Seventh Poem, that is, from 1958 to 1964. The addition to the above, "Lyrical Digression on the Seventh Elegy" was written in 1958, the same year the Seventh Poem was composed. It may be noted that these poems have been compiled and arranged by Professor Viktor Zhirmunsky, a Formalist critic, who based their order on the text from the volume, The Flight of Time. Zhirmunsky maintained that he had been able "to establish her last book in the order she would have liked".[2] Judith Hemschemeyer, a prominent critic and translator of Akhmatova's poetry, in her translation of her poems in The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova, followed Zhirmunsky's arrangement of the poems while at the same time incorporated M. M. Kralin's (another critic of Akhmatova) compilation, which included epigraphs for the Third, Fourth and Fifth elegies, and a dedication to the Fifth.

Commenting on Akhmatova's poems, Hemschemeyer remarked that the Northern Elegies were "superb...in which Akhmatova mingled personal, historical and political motifs".[3] These themes can be seen running through the seven-poem sequence dealt with in a melancholy tone. In the First Poem ("Prehistory"), the poet begins with a description of contemporary Russia. She describes a bustling country in which buildings like "monstrosities are growing"[4] and streets lined with pubs, shops, signboards and "Dance classes everywhere". But the country, according to the poet, still resembled "an old lithograph" where "Liteiny Boulevard darkens, rigid, straight". This implies that in spite of the images of a bustling and vibrant life, shadows of the unpleasant past still haunts the country everywhere. An even darker description of the country is portrayed in the image of "Old Russa", the setting for Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov, with its "rotting arbors in the little gardens, / And a windowpane as black as a hole in the ice". The blackness of the windowpane suggests hidden secrets that are better kept unexplored: "And it seems that such things happened here / That we'd better not look in". These "things" may be attributed to the wars and revolutions that destroyed the country, which the poet later mentions.

From this physical description of Russia, the poet moves on to speak about her childhood:

And in the narrow hall the wallpaper

We feasted our eyes on in our childhood

By the yellow light of the kerosene lamp.

But the warm light of the "kerosene lamp" is quickly cooled and the poet is suddenly dragged away from the memory of the past when,

Everything out of order, rushed, somehow...

Fathers and grandfathers incomprehensible.

Lands mortgaged.

This sense of disorder is further heightened with the poet sensing the emotional detachment growing between mother and daughter:

And a kindness that as an inheritance

I have from her, it seems —

Useless gift for my harsh life...

As Akhmatova hints about her own "harsh life" — the separation from her husband, his arrest and execution, the arrest and exile of her son, the loss of her poet peers during the Stalinist terror and the censorship on her poetry by the Soviet government — she turns her attention to the state of affairs in her country, which in more ways than one has been responsible for the harsh life she leads. In doing so, Akhmatova relates how the "country shivers" as a result of political unrest, which has prevailed even up to the time of writing the poem, that is, the 1940s. By alluding to the protest writings of Dostoevsky — "His pen squeaks, and page after page / Stinks of Semyonov Square" — which

speaks about his arrest and imprisonment, the poet is able to draw attention to a history of cruelty and suppression, which has been perpetuated to contemporary times so that the entire Russian reality is seen as "this primordial chaos", and it was during this time that Akhmatova was born, just in time to witness both prevailing chaos and the cataclysmic events, "those pageants", to come.

The sense of disorder and foreboding is carried to the "Second" poem but in a more private and personal tone so as to show that what had happened in history is now happening in her life: "So here it is — that autumn landscape / Of which I've been so frightened all my life". It may be noted here that Akhmatova did not only undergo dark and tragic experiences at the hands of the Stalinist regime but that her sorrow also emanates from her own domestic crisis, which is seen in the failure of her marriages to Nikolai Gumilev and to Vladimir Shileiko. These experiences of sorrow and fear, which disrupted the order of her life have given rise to such black despair that the poet says:

> It's as if everything I've struggled with inside myself
> All my life received its own life
> And bodied forth in these
> Blind walls, in this black garden...

As a result of this struggle, the poet has become hard like a stone: "But I myself was like granite". In this state of stoicism she is able to look at her own wretched condition as if "From another world, forever strange". Towards the end of the poem, Akhmatova ruminates on the nature of her suffering, which she says:

> ...happened many times,
>
> And not to me alone — to others too,
>
> And even worse.

The lines above are the poet's attempt to universalise her sorrow, although, in the next few lines she relapses to a kind of despairing mood with the memory of her personal failures in love:

> Fifteen years ago, with what rejoicing
>
> You greeted this day, you begged the heavens
>
> And the choirs of stars and the choirs of oceans
>
> To salute the glorious meeting
>
> With the one you left today...

Such painful personal experiences combined with the terror of the Stalin years become the "stern age" that has not only turned the poet into "granite" but has in fact rechanneled the course of her life — "I, like a river, / Was rechanneled by this stern age" ("Third") — so that she can no longer recognise the direction her life is taking. In being "rechanneled by this stern age", Akhmatova laments about the creative potential that had to be suppressed; the opportunities that were

lost; and the world that could have been hers but lost to her because of the crippling nature of her changed circumstances. Thus, the poet speaks of the "many spectacles I've missed", "the curtain" that rose and fell without her, the "friends / I've never met once in my life", the "cities' skylines" that "could have drawn tears from my eyes", but which she did not come to know because "I only know one city in the world". So, unfortunately instead of the world opening up in front of her, she is only made aware of "beginnings and endings, / And life after the end" during the precarious years of the Stalin reign of terror. From these crippling circumstances of the Russian reality, the poet turns to a melancholy reflection of her married life, in particular, her marriage to Gumilev, which had turned sour when "some other woman occupied / The special place reserved for me". Life after that became even worse, "Leaving me the nickname, with which / I did, probably, everything that could be done". Her melancholy is then heightened by her realisation that because of her nickname (it must be remembered that her father did not allow her to use the family name for trivial literary pursuits and her divorce to Gumilev cost her her husband's title) she will not even be able to "lie down, alas, in my own grave".

In the "Fourth" poem, Akhmatova forlornly contemplates on the memory and forgetfulness of her rechanneled life. She observes that there are "three ages to memories". The first age is the past that "is like

just yesterday". It is so strong that its remnants intermingle with the present: "Laughter has not yet died, tears flow". But although this kind of memory is like "a seal on the heart, the kiss, / Unique, valedictory, unforgettable..." yet it "does not long endure". Thus, in the second age, just as "ardent letters are decomposing, / Portraits are stealthily changing", remembrance also fades away in time. It slowly regresses into the back of the mind like "a remote suburb, a solitary house,... / Where there are spiders, and dust on everything". This happens because as the "clock ticks" and

> ...one springtime is superseded
> By another, the sky glows pink,
> Names of cities change
> And there are no remaining witnesses to the events,
> And no one to weep with, no one to remember with.

Even as the poet speaks of memory that fades away with time; the changes in life that obscure memory and utter loneliness and isolation of human life, it must be noted that she is also making references to her harrowing experiences in the Stalin regime. Those terrible experiences were felt and understood only by the women with whom the poet had shared her experiences of grief and despair. But now these witnesses are no longer alive and the poet, to underline her loneliness and isolation, has no one left with whom to share her memory. Therefore,

in the absence of witnesses the poet realises that everything is forgotten: "And slowly the shades withdraw from us" and waking one morning "we realize that we have forgotten / Even the path to that solitary house". Further, the changes that have occurred during the course of time have not only compelled her to suffering alone but have also alienated her from the present: "Everything has changed: the people, the objects, the walls, / And nobody knows us — we are strangers". The poet's sense of loss, alienation and despair becomes a bitter thing indeed when "we couldn't have fit / That past into the boundaries of our life".

In her bitterness, the poet, in the Fifth Poem ("About the 1910's") tries to find solace by going back to her childhood. However, in doing so she finds that

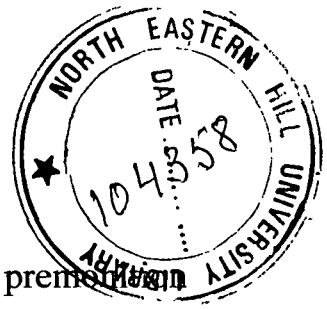
> there was no rosy childhood...
> Freckles and toy bears and curls,s
> And doting aunts and scary uncles, or even
> Friends among the river pebbles.
> I myself, from the very beginning...

Being alone from the beginning further accentuates the loneliness and alienation felt in the preceding poem so much so that her life seems

> like someone else's dream or delirium,
> Or a reflection in someone else's mirror,
> Without flesh, without meaning, without a name.

As a result, the poet plunges into utter despair and resigns herself to a future of sorrow and suffering: "Already I knew the list of crimes / That I was destined to commit". In this way the poet steps into her life "like a somnambulist", alone "without family, unskilled". However, "Doors unexpectedly opened" for her and she received much recognition from the people who "streamed out and exclaimed: "She came, she herself came!". But even as the people praised and admired her "the more frightful it was to live in the world" because she already knows the events of her own life and how she is to suffer from the imprisonment and death of her near and dear ones:

> For I knew that I would pay dearly
> In prison, in the grave, in the madhouse,
> Wherever someone like me must awaken —



In the "Sixth" poem, Akhmatova speaks about her premonition of impending doom, which turned her life into a dreadful thing: "It was dreadful to live in that house". The poet was young; she was happy with her husband; the two of them were full of ideas; they lived amidst good fortune and the future looked bright for them. Yet, in spite of all that, the poet was constantly gnawed by a vague foreboding fear of something dreadful and sinister threatening their existence. The poet concretises this fear in the form of "one who every night / Scratched like a dog at the door". In the light of later events in her private life and

the country as a whole, this sense of impending doom could relate to both the soured relationship with her husband and the Stalinist reign of terror, which had turned her life into one long nightmare of pain and sorrow.

In the "Seventh", Akhmatova moves away from her premonition of impending events and speaks about the agony of her silence. Her silence is, first of all, a result of the act of suppression carried out by the Stalin regime, through its mass arrests, exiles and executions of the thousands of innocent people on mere suspicion of being anti-government. As such, everyone felt unsafe and threatened that they even dread to whisper about the atrocities perpetrated against them. Akhmatova herself found it dangerous to speak out and expose the terror, let alone write about them. So she had been "silent, silent for thirty years" and whatever she had written about the years of terror had been merely verbal compositions memorised by many of her women friends who carry them around like "secret chains / Who memorised every syllable". It may be noted here that in spite of a ban imposed on her poetry, copies of her poems were circulated secretly among friends and readers. In this way her "silence" conversely speaks its own language

> ...in music and in song
>
> And in somebody's loathsome love,

In partings, in books...

But even as the poet hails the ones who dared "To hoist my silence on a banner, / And who lived with it, and who believed in it", she becomes frightful at the prospect of the censorship imposed on her poetry by the Stalinist government, "When with all its weight / It presses on me, breathing and drawing close". Akhmatova knows full well that "There is no defense" against such a brutal force and one can only imagine her sense of vulnerability and "how it scorched my heart / And with what kind of fire". Towards the end of the poem, however, Akhmatova summons up courage to fight the silence that "almost devoured my soul". In a defiant and desperate tone she says: "But I will break it some day / To summon death to the whipping post" and broke it she did, not only in these poems but also in the publication of Requiem for the very first time in 1963.

The last poem, "Lyrical Digression on the Seventh Elegy", is a revelation of the history of her life under the Soviet regime. The poem is reminiscent of Requiem in its vivid description of the mass arrest and the plight of the prisoners and their relatives alike. The poem speaks of "The prisoner's dock", the "sweat-soaked prisoner's jacket" and how Akhmatova

...inhaled the stink of cheap tobacco

And the strong stifling smell

Of soldiers' boots.

The poet further reveals how

...a frightening voice read the list of charges,

And everyone thought it was a human being,

But it was a black megaphone gone berserk.

With this image of the "megaphone gone berserk", the poet is able to capture the essence of the fear, the paranoia and the madness that characterise the Stalin years. As the women listen to the megaphone and wait for word about their loved ones, seasons fly past so that

I don't know if it's summer...

Or if a cold gray rain is seeping down

Or if May is coming and the lilac has bloomed.

In the uncertainty of her waiting for the fate of her imprisoned son her suffering intensifies and she is overpowered by a sense of helplessly. Sitting outside the prison gates she says: "And I sit — and once more swallow spit / from hunger".

Apart from the pain of losing a son and forlornness and terror of the situation, the poet also recalls her attempts to deal with the government's censorship imposed on her poetry. She also talks about how in her fear — constantly harassed by "informers" — she had even compromised her integrity as a writer:

How at thirty I was considered old

And at thirty-five I used deceit and flattery

To persuade someone in Moscow

To come and listen to my melancholy ravings...

Thus in the poem Akhmatova relives the terror of the Stalin years and expresses a sense of regret that the harrowing experiences arising from the attempts to suppress her creative voice as a poet had forced her to "deceit and flattery". The defiance and the determination to break the silence against all those cruel and inhuman acts that she talks about in the seventh elegy are not repeated in this poem.

It has been seen from the above discussion that although the Northern Elegies are fragmentary poems, they are not altogether without a pattern. The poet is in the future, examining her past and dividing that past into two stages. In the first stage, she speaks about things as they had been when she was young, full of ideas and hope ("...we were both young / And full of ideas") in the company of her husband and child. In the second stage she speaks about the terrible things that were to happen and the sad changes that "rechanneled" her life. In thus looking at her past, the poet thematically weaves the historical, the personal and the political to give voice to her immense sorrow. The underlying tone of the poems, therefore, is not only sadness or melancholy but a despairing sense of loss relieved only by her spirit of defiance in the seventh elegy ("But I will break it [the silence] someday"). This is in keeping with their nature as elegies,

which are as Friezman says, "above all characterised by the melancholic mood, sadness, lamentation, etc., but it is usually not related to death and mourning" and this definition, he reinstates, "fits Akhmatova's Northern Elegies". [5]

It may be noted here that, although Friezman has drawn up a general definition of the elegy, he is essentially referring to the classical definition of the genre, put forward by Greek and Latin elegists, which also included "any type of serious, subjective meditation on the part of the poet, whether this reflective element was concerned with death, love, war or merely the presentation of information".[6] The Northern Elegies, as seen in the discussion above, fall within the premise of this definition. The poems reveal a serious meditation on history, the poet's sad experiences, both personal and as a result of the persecution of her near and dear ones at the hands of the regime. For instance, in the First Poem, the poet presents a physical description of Russia where the "Pubs are bustling, droshkies flying". However, in her meditation on the history of the country, the poet is painfully aware of a Russia that "Resemble an old lithograph" with its dark and unpleasant past. She laments the destruction and the turmoil brought about by wars and revolutions that mar the entire Russian history, and at the same time she is saddened by the effects of these

disastrous events, which resulted in the loss of an established order when

> Everything out of order, rushed, somehow...
>
> Fathers and grandfathers incomprehensible.
>
> Lands mortgaged.
>
> ("Prehistory")

While lamenting the gloom that overshadows her country, Akhmatova sees the chaos of a nation reflected in her own wretched life. From the second to the sixth elegies, the poet laments the horrific turn of events and the sorrowful condition of her life. She grieves over her utter failure in love: "And some other woman occupied / The special place reserved for me" ("Third"), her loneliness and isolation: "I myself, from the very beginning" ("Fifth"), the missed opportunities that might have brought her happiness: "Oh, how many spectacles I've missed" ("Third"), and the harrowing experiences at the hands of a brutal Stalinist regime.

It was during Stalin's "stern age" that Akhmatova experienced the greatest misery of her life. In the seventh elegy and in "Lyrical Digression on the Seventh Elegy", Akhmatova reveals the atrocities meted out to her and to the people of Russia by the Soviet government. A sense of melancholy pervades the poems as the poet speaks of how the government silenced her through the censorship of her poetry and

how "It is deforming my fate, / It almost devoured my soul". The sense of grief becomes more intense as the poet speaks of the time when she waited outside the prison in Leningrad —standing in the sun or getting drenched in the rain and "once more swallow spit from hunger" — to learn about the fate of her arrested son.

The sense of melancholy and grief that pervades the Northern Elegies resembles very closely the grief and sorrow expressed by the poet in Requiem. The most striking resemblance with Requiem can be seen in the "Lyrical Digression on the Seventh Elegy" in which the poet gives a blunt history of the atrocities committed by the Stalinist regime. For example, the poet's description of the "prisoner's dock" and the "strong stifling smell / Of soldiers' boots" is almost identical with the "convicts burrow" and the "pacing / Of the sentries with their heavy boots" in Requiem's "Dedication". Further, the sound of the "megaphone" reading out "the list of charges" can be seen as an extended description of how the women in "Dedication" came to know that their loved ones have been sentenced. But apart from textual similarities, Requiem and the Northern Elegies more importantly resemble one another in their treatment of the sense of loss and grief.

Both poems treat the themes at the personal, the historical and the political level. At the personal level, Requiem speaks strongly about the loss experienced by the mother as a result of the arrest and

sentencing of her son. This sense of loss and grief is felt throughout the cycle of poems as shown: "Sentenced...And at once the tears come rolling, / Cut off from the world, quite on her own" ("Dedication"). In poem '1' Akhmatova describes how "It was dawn when they took you. I followed, / As a widow walks after the bier". Again in poem '7' ("Sentence"), the poet refers to the sentencing of her son: "And the word in stone has fallen heavy / On my breast". Further, the poet's sense of loss also embraces the loss of her husband, Gumilev, who was arrested and executed in 1921, the arrest of Nikolai Punin along with her son in 1938 and the death of her poet friend Osip Mandelstam in a camp in Siberia in 1939. In the Northern Elegies, however, the poet laments the loss of her own self-identity as she, like a river, "Was rechanneled by this stern age" ("Third") of Stalin and who, as a result of this, is left to wander about like a "somnambulist" whose potential has been scotched and whose opportunities have been destroyed. Apart from this, the poet is filled with utter despair when she realises that the estrangement with her husband was inevitable and irretrievable, thus "Leaving me the nickname" only. At this, the poet sees herself as one who has been condemned by fate to commit a "list of crimes" ("Fifth") in her life.

Not only does the poet lament the loss of her self-identity and opportunities, which was brought about by a broken marriage and a

cruel regime, but she also laments the loss of continuity and order in her life. This can be seen in both the poems. In Requiem, the poet mourns the discontinuity from her past as she is suddenly wrenched from it and thrown into the terrible chaos during the Stalinist purges. In poem '4' she speaks of the youthful days and sees herself as the "gay sinner of Tsarskoe Selo" who in her "sweet notoriety" was unmindful of the bleak future that lay in front of her. Similarly, in Epilogue II, the poet makes allusions to her childhood and the place where she was born in an attempt to reconstruct the past: "down by the sea, where I entered this world". In the Northern Elegies, the poet's childhood is expressed in the images of "The rustle of skirts, the pattern of plaids" and "in the narrow hall the wallpaper / We feasted our eyes on in our childhood" ("Prehistory"). But here also as in Requiem, this idyllic picture is suddenly disrupted when "Everything out of order, rushed, somehow... / Fathers and grandfathers incomprehensible. Lands mortgaged", in the wake of wars and revolutions that marred the entire Russian history.

In connection with history, both the poems are steeped in historical allusions. In Requiem, Akhmatova uses history to help highlight the intensity of her emotional distress and to lament the destruction of Russian culture. The poet does this by recalling a period of cruelty and suppression meted out to the people of the country and

by placing this cruelty in a tradition plagued with turmoil and civil unrest. For instance, in poem '1', Akhmatova makes allusions to "the wives of the Streltsy" who wailed and pleaded for their husbands who were executed by Peter the Great in 1698 even as she is now silently wailing at the prison gates at Leningrad for the release of her son. In very much the same way, in the Northern Elegies, the poet refers to "the convict from Omsk", that is, Dostoevsky who understood how "the country shivers" even during his time. By doing so the poet firmly places the Stalin reign of terror in the tradition of fear and cruelty, which could be found in the country's past.

However, it is with reference to the political motif that a closer resemblance is seen between the two poems. As already shown earlier, there is a close similarity in both Requiem and the Northern Elegies in the words used by the poet to describe the atrocities carried out by the Soviet government on the Russian people. Moreover, the poet's grief and suffering under a stifling Stalinist regime is clearly and intensely portrayed. In Requiem, the entire cycle of poems chronicles the arrest and sentencing of her son and also exposes the grief and suffering of the mother. After the arrest of her son, Akhmatova underwent a series of emotions, ranging from shock to denial and anger and was hanging dangerously close to insanity. Although this progression in the expression of grief is not seen in the Northern Elegies, the "Seventh"

poem and "Lyrical Digression on the Seventh Elegy" are nonetheless stark revelations of the torment the poet had to endure during the Stalin years of terror. In the "Seventh" poem, the poet talks about her crippling silence imposed upon her by the government's ruthless censorship on her poetry. As a result, the poet laments her inability to write for fear of being discovered and persecuted. She says:

> I myself am sometimes afraid of it,
>
> When with all its weight
>
> It presses on me, breathing and drawing close.
>
> ("Seventh")

This imposed silence on the poet is similar to the mute existence of the suffering women in Requiem who lived a life "more lifeless than the dead" ("Dedication") and who would only communicate in whispers for fear of being denounced by the Soviet government. However, just as Akhmatova takes upon herself the responsibility to speak for the people of Russia in Requiem, in the Northern Elegies she resolves to break the silence imposed on her and to expose the acts of terror perpetuated on the Russian masses: "But I will break it some day / To summon death to the whipping post".

Thus, the two poems can be seen to be similar to each other on various important aspects in the treatment of the themes of grief and suffering. But while in Requiem the process of mourning is attributed

to the loss of a son and the thousands of others like him, the Northern Elegies focus more on the loss of the poet's self-identity and opportunities. Further, if one examines the two poems from the point of view of an elegy, the dissimilarity between them becomes even more clearly defined. Requiem, as has been observed in the previous chapter, fulfils the requirements of the unconventional elegy as a poem about loss and mourning and while it also dwells on the idea of life's mutability and its transience, it also has a definite movement from grief towards consolation and remembrance. Besides this, the poem uses many of the fundamental elegiac conventions as discussed in chapter two. On the other hand, the Northern Elegies assume the title, "elegies", by virtue of being poems that have an underlying tone of sadness and "melancholic mood" in them and thus may be said to conform to the classical definition of the genre as quoted earlier. There is no physical death seen in the poems and there is also a marked absence of the elegiac conventions in them. As elegies, therefore, Requiem and the Northern Elegies can best be understood by quoting Friezman's definition again in full, which says:

> The elegy is above all characterised by the melancholic mood, sadness, lamentation, etc., but it is usually not related to death and mourning. This definition fits Akhmatova's Northern Elegies but not Requiem. (EFR p. 343)

It may also be added that the Northern Elegies do not follow the elegiac contour of grief-consolation-resurrection. In these elegies there is no attempt by the poet to seek consolation except for her determination in the "Seventh" poem that someday she would "break" the silence in an act of defiance against an oppressive regime. In this respect, the elegies are closer to the modern elegies, which according to Ramazani do not make use of any consolatory formula but wallow deeper and deeper in the very loss that has created them:

> ...modern elegists 'practise losing farther, losing faster' [and the] 'One Art' of the modern elegy is not transcendence or redemption of loss but immersion in it.[7]

Endnotes

[1] See Judith Hemschemeyer, trans., The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova, ed. Roberta Reeder (Massachusetts: Zephyr Press, 2006) 829.

[2] See Judith Hemschemeyer, Trans, "Translator's Preface". Details as 1 above. 5.

[3] Ibid.

[4] See 1 above. All quotations of the The Northern Elegies are taken from this source.

[5] See Sharon M. Bailey, "An Elegy for Russia: Akhmatova's Requiem", The Slavic and East European Journal Vol. 43, No. 2 (1999) 343.

[6] See endnote 4 in Chapter II.

[7] See Chapter II. 45.

Chapter V

Conclusion

Having attempted to study the nature of Requiem and the Northern Elegies as elegies through the use of genre criticism, this chapter will undertake an assessment of Akhmatova as an elegiac poet while also summing up arguments previously made. In making this assessment, the chapter will also examine her love poems, many of which have been described by critics like Leonid I. Strakhovsky as "tragic". As he puts it, in these poems, "Akhmatova speaks about...simple intimate and personal sorrow" of love, "love's parting, unrequited love, love's betrayal...feelings of grief, of loneliness, of despair".[1] What the chapter will also attempt is a brief comparative assessment of the "tragic" character of the love poems and the elegiac nature of Requiem and the Northern Elegies by going into the very beginning of the poet's career.

One wintry evening in 1911 at Vyacheslav Ivanov's residence where poets both renowned and the aspiring ones gathered, Gumilev's young wife, Anna Akhmatova, was asked to read her very first poem in public. She rose from her seat timidly and with a hesitating voice began to read:

My heart grew chill so helplessly,
Although my footsteps seemed light.
In all my anguish I was drawing
My left-hand glove upon my right.

There seemed to be so many steps,
Although I knew there were three.
The breath of autumn in the maples
Seemed to whisper: "Die with me!

I have been deceived by fate,
That has never faith nor rue."
And I answered in a whisper:
"So have I. I'll die with you!"

This is the song of our last meeting.
I glanced toward the house in the night:
Only the bedroom lights were burning
With an uncaring yellow light.

These melancholy lines can be seen as befitting for a poet whose life is soaked in grief and suffering and at the same time as definitive of her poetry, which has been termed by critics as largely mournful and elegiac in nature. Although the history of her life is not written in books and biographies, much of it can be seen in her own poems like

the one above where Akhmatova speaks of experiences from her own miserable life. That she did not have a happy childhood, for instance, is indicated in the fifth elegy of the Northern Elegies:

> And there was no rosy childhood...
>
> Freckles and toy bears and curls,
>
> And doting aunts and scary uncles, or even
>
> Friends among the river pebbles.

In marriage too, Akhmatova was never able to find the love she was longing for. Many of her earlier poems speak about her yearning for a lover who was mostly absent or about a woman who is desolate and desperate. These poems are mainly attributed to her marriage to Gumilev, which ended in shambles. Her second marriage to Shileiko was yet another disappointment and her suggested closeness to Punin never culminated in anything emotionally significant. The portrayal of such despondent emotions is so strong in her poems that Strakhovsky calls her the "poetess of tragic love". On top of her domestic crisis, the terror of the Stalin years took a heavy toll on her life. Firstly, she lost her first husband, Gumilev, when he was arrested and executed in 1921. Thereafter, her son was arrested three times and finally exiled to the camps in Siberia in 1939. She also lost her peers and friends Mandelstam and Nikolai Punin, who were both arrested and died as prisoners under the Stalinist regime. Finally, her already tormented life

was subjected to more misery in the form of an unforgiving censorship on her poetry by the Soviet government from 1925 to 1940. Hence, it may be observed that Akhmatova's life was one long unrelieved suffering and this became a major source of her grief for her poems. This phenomenon would be seen everywhere, be it in her early love poems, in Requiem or in the Northern Elegies.

Therefore, in an attempt to consider Akhmatova as an elegiac poet, this project has sought to focus its study on a cycle of poems, strung together as Requiem — to critically analyse its nature as an elegy and also to show through the biographical and historical approach that she is an elegiac poet mostly as a result of the conditions of her life. The examination of Requiem as an elegy is undertaken with the help of genre criticism to see whether the poem fits the definition of the elegy and in what way the conventions of the elegy are followed and modified in it. But first, Chapter I undertakes to discuss the making and development of Requiem to throw some light on the tragic events that have given birth to it. It has been observed in this chapter that the Soviet government under Stalin had its control over everything in the country, including the production of literature. Writers were given strict rules and formulae on how to write and were also forced to praise the government. Any hint of dissent in their writings was met with stern action — they were denounced and their writings were

banned from production or even worse, they were arrested, exiled or executed. As a result, Russian literature suffered a major setback for many years. It is under such circumstances that Akhmatova wrote her famous elegy, Requiem. Defying the strictures of the government, she composed short easily memorised verses and asked her most trusted women associates to memorise them too. This was how she kept the poems from being exposed and at the same time prevented them from being lost or forgotten. Working under an oppressive environment and although she composed the cycle of poems on different dates, Akhmatova never strayed from the theme of loss and grief, which resulted from the arrest and sentencing of her son and on a broader scale, from the arrest and sentencing of thousands other sons and husbands and also from the inhuman atrocities committed on the Russian people in general.

It is this pervasive sense of melancholy in the poem and its mournful tone that forms the subject of this study — to examine Requiem as an elegy. But in order to determine the poem as an elegy, requires an in depth knowledge of the various definitions of the elegy and its conventions, which forms the subject matter of the second chapter. It has been observed in this chapter that there are two possible definitions of the elegy — "one in its traditional sense and the other in its broader, unconventional sense". In the traditional sense, the elegy

refers to "an elaborately formal lyric poem lamenting the death of a friend or public figure. It is characterised by a powerful intertwining of emotion and rhetoric, of loss and figuration, and above all by the movement from mourning to consolation". However, according to Greek and Latin writers the definition of the elegy also included "any type of serious, subjective meditation on the part of the poet, whether this reflective element was concerned with death, love, war or merely the presentation of information". In its unconventional sense, the elegy "may refer to a poem of serious reflection on a solemn subject or the tragic aspects of life... having a deep pervasive tone of melancholy reflection on life's transience and its sorrows". The definition, from time to time, has undergone numerous modifications by elegists so that in its modern form it "permeates a wide range of poems about war, love, race gender, meditation, the self, the family, and the poet,... incorporating more anger and scepticism, more conflict and anxiety than ever before". Apart from the enumeration of the definitions, the chapter has also drawn up a list of the conventions employed in the elegy, such as "the representation of the dead friend as a shepherd to be mourned by the natural world, or pastoral contextualisation with its apostrophe and pathetic fallacy; the myth of the vegetation deity; the use of repetitions and refrains; the reiterated questioning and the outbreak of vengeful anger or denunciation; the procession of

mourners; the passage from grief to consolation and the traditional images of resurrection, transfiguration, stellification and deification. Additional conventions can also be seen in the use of the images of flowers and light, the eclogic division within or between mourning voices, the question of contests, rewards, and inheritance, and the unusual degree of self-consciousness regarding the actual performance of mourning".

Having examined the elegy as a genre, the third chapter enters into an examination of the elegiac mode of Requiem with a view to establishing it as an elegy and to see which definition fits it best. In examining the poem it is observed that Requiem differs from the conventional elegy as the poet mourns not the death but the arrest and sentencing of her son. However, a closer study of the poem shows that the sense of death is not completely lacking and that in fact it looms large over the fate of her son. Apart from this looming sense of death, in the poem, Akhmatova also makes oblique references to death, which can be seen in the allusions to the execution of her husband, Gumilev, and the death of Mandelstam. Furthermore, it may be said that the poet makes indirect references to death through the use of images such as, the ominous "Stars of death" ("Prelude") and the weeping wives of the Streltsy whose husbands were executed by Peter the Great in 1698. Hence, death in the poem is used as a "foil or as a background against

which the experiences of the poet and her son are projected".[2] But such a stance towards death does not fall under the purview of the conventional elegy. It is only when the poem is studied against the definition of the unconventional elegy that it can be termed an elegy, being a serious poem about loss and mourning with a "pervasive tone of melancholy" running through the entire cycle of poems. In the poem the poet is seen mourning the loss of her son as a result of his arrest and exile, and it is this loss with its uncertainty that forms the source of her grief and despair. Moreover, the poet mourns not only the loss of her son but mourns also on behalf of all the women, mothers and wives, who had suffered the same fate as her and this besides lamenting the atrocities meted out to thousands of Russians during the Stalin era.

Further, in the course of the assessment it has been observed that the poem employs many of the conventions of the elegy, to name a few, the convention of the pathetic fallacy, the convention of thematic universality of grief and the movement from grief and despair to consolation and remembrance. At the same time it has also been perceived that some of the conventions have undergone modifications but these modifications though not as drastic as some in the modern elegy. For instance, the poem while portraying nature as grieving together with the poet and the suffering women: "Mountains bow

beneath that boundless sorrow, / And the mighty river stops its flow" ("Dedication"), it also modifies the convention of the pathetic fallacy by showing that nature can also be quite indifferent to the fate of humans:

> Silent flows the silent Don,
> Yellow moon looks quietly on,
>
> Cap askew, looks in the room,
> Sees a shadow in the gloom.
>
> Sees this woman, sick, at home,
> Sees this woman, all alone,
>
> Husband in the grave, son in prison,
> Say a prayer for me.
>
> (poem '2')

In the fourth chapter, an attempt is made to study both Requiem and the Northern Elegies to shed more light on the elegiac nature of both poems. The poems blend personal, historical and political motifs and are also intensely melancholy in mood. However, as Friezman observes: "The elegy is above all characterised by the melancholic mood, sadness, lamentation, etc., but it is usually not related to death and mourning. This definition fits Akhmatova's Northern Elegies but

not Requiem it is usually not related to death and mourning".[3] The definition above does not completely fit Requiem because despite its underlying mood of melancholy and lamentation, the poem is born out of a sense of loss experienced by the poet stemming from the arrest and sentencing of her son and the sense of possible death that clouds his fate. Besides this, there is a definite movement from grief to consolation and remembrance, which is not to be found in the Northern Elegies. Moreover, while Requiem uses many of the conventions of the elegy, the Northern Elegies do not employ such conventions. Therefore, while Requiem can be classed as an unconventional elegy, the Northern Elegies are elegies only in the sense of Friezman's definition above, which is identical with the definition put forward by Greek and Latin elegists who considered the elegy to be a poem, which also included "any type of serious, subjective meditation on the part of the poet, whether this reflective element was concerned with death, love, war or merely the presentation of information".[4] Another major point of difference between them is in the fact that the Northern Elegies closely resemble the modern elegy in the absence of any attempt at consolation. Requiem, however, as illustrated earlier has a definite consolatory formula and has none of the modern elegiac tendencies — enumerated in chapter two — which could be found in the Northern Elegies as shown.

In the course of the study on the nature of Requiem and the Northern Elegies, it has been observed that Akhmatova is deeply influenced by the grief, which is the outcome of her wretched experiences in life. However, the poet has dealt with these depressing encounters with such sensitivity that many critics have considered her a lyricist. But Akhmatova's lyricism is a unique one. In the article Anna Akhmatova: In Memoriam, Wladimir Weidle has this to say about her poems:

> Their lyricism was so immediate, so personal that many a line could have been extracted from letters or diaries. Those who felt this were not mistaken; they were amazed and delighted precisely by the contrast between this intimacy of tone and the severe cast of the poetic diction which did not allow for any excess of emotions or any verbosity whatsoever.[5]

It is precisely this "intimacy of tone" and the "severe cast of the poetic diction" that enabled Akhmatova to express her deepest and most private anguish without degenerating into mere sentimentalism. This tone of controlled melancholy is not only seen in the poems that have been examined but also in all of her poetry beginning with her first book of verse, Vecher (Evening), which came out in 1912. The poems in the collection reveal a young woman deeply in love, a love, which at first glance is exquisitely intimate and personal. Except for a few, most of the poems in this volume are addressed to the beloved. The beloved,

however, is generally absent and the thought that he has become tired of her or has betrayed her and left her, constantly plays in the reader's mind:

> Under her dark veil she wrung her hands...
> "Why are you so pale today?"
> "Because I made him drink of stinging grief
> Until he got drunk on it.
>
> How can I forget? He staggered out,
> His mouth twisted in agony...
> I ran down not touching the banister
> And caught up with him at the gate.
>
> Panting, I cried: 'A joke!
> That's all it was. If you leave, I'll die.'
> He smiled calmly and grimly
> And told me: 'Don't stand there in the wind.'"
>
> (Poem 7)

The poem presents itself as a quarrel between the poet and her lover and the parting that results from it. But more than just a description of a domestic incident, the poem is highly dramatic with physical gestures, and grim facial expressions and dialogue, which is both vicious and pitiable. Such dramatic expression of emotions has an almost immediate effect on the readers who cannot help but

sympathise with the poet and shiver at the tragic finality of the tone of the last line. Other poems in the volume also speak about what Akhmatova calls "meetings" or similar emotional encounters between lovers. In the preface to The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova, containing an english translation of Akhmatova's poetry, Judith Hemschemeyer iterates that "Evening shows two people bound together, grappling with their own and the beloved's emotions, struggling to get free, and once free, bewildered and empty". [6] Yuli Aikenvald, an acclaimed Russian critic, also maintains that Evening is "an intimate diary of a woman in love..." and further states that "this intimacy goes beyond the limits of a personal confession, just as everything which is truly and fundamentally personal is thereby also social; the subjective in completing the circle, returns to the objective".[7]

In 1914, Akhmatova came out with another volume of poems, Chetki (Rosary). Here as in her first volume, the poet explore similar themes and continues to write 'encounter poems'. Most of the poems allude to a Russian orthodox Christian protagonist who is often ill with tuberculosis. Disappointment in love becomes the underlying theme of this volume of poems, a theme introduced in Evening. Akhmatova also introduces religious motifs into her poems and juxtaposed them with expressions of worldly love. In reaction to this bold act, writer and

critic Korney Chukovsky, in a lecture in September 1921, denounced Akhmatova as "a nun who crosses herself and kisses her beloved".[8] But the nastiest censure came from Andrey Zhdanov who labelled Akhmatova as "half nun, half harlot".[9] In spite of a wave of negative criticism hurled at her, however, public response was immense, so much so that "her book was sold out in record time and her name was soon on the lips of lovers of poetry throughout the length and breadth of Russia".[10] What attracted such a response from the Russian reader's are the naturalness of feeling and the novelty of the feminine perspective that she offers through her lines. In her expression of love and its various manifestations — "love's parting, unrequited love, love's betrayal, clear and serene confidence in the lover",[11] Akhmatova speaks always from the woman's point of view without portraying woman as the victim. The poet-critic, Strakhovsky says, "Akhmatova remains always a woman either in the description of her own feelings or in her outlook on the beauties around her and the world's mystery and misery".[12] Many of the poems have been attributed to her husband, Gumilev. In the poem attributed to her husband, for instance, whom she loved with a kind of desperate love Akhmatova presents her feelings with such feminine quality that the lines are at once sad and loving, accusatory and forgiving:

You thought you would find me dead,

And you brought an artless little wreath.

How painfully you wound my heart with a smile,

Affectionate, mocking and sad.

What is the weight of death to me now!

If you stay with me awhile,

I'll implore God to forgive

You, and all those you love.

(May 1913, Petersburg)

When The White Flock came out in 1917, Akhmatova's critics remarked that in this volume, "Akhmatova clothes the emotional fullness of her poems in the form of a conversation or a story told to someone present".[13] Her poems although shorter in length, still remained 'sharp and intimate' and melancholy. The brevity of her lines suggests her strained efforts to handle the present crisis. With her marriage to Gumilev going through a rough time and with her divorce seemingly imminent, the poet finds release for her sorrow in poetry:

At first it sears,

Like a freezing wind,

And then into the heart it falls,

As a single, salty tear.

And the wicked heart starts to regret

Something. It becomes melancholy.

And it cannot forget

This little grief.

("Song about a Song")

With her divorce becoming a reality, the tone of her poetry becomes even more melancholic. In "May Snow" the poet's "brittle voice" even turns tragic as she marks the end of the love with her husband:

A transparent shroud lies

On the fresh sod and imperceptibly melts.

The cruel, chilling spring

Is killing the swelling buds.

And the sight of this early death is so frightful,

That I can't bear to look at God's world.

I feel the sorrow that King David bequeathed,

The kingly, thousand-year grief.

("May Snow")

Although tragic love-poems predominate thematically, war poems were also included in the volume — "premonitory poems about World War I, poems confessing the betrayal of the soldier by the woman back home, anguished poems about the death of young men", [14] which carry in them the same melancholy tone of the love poems.

After White Flock Akhmatova came out with two more volumes Plantain and Anno Domini MCMXXI, both of them published in 1921before she was banned from publishing till the death of Stalin and

the publication of Requiem and her later poems. The poems in Plantain, unlike her earlier love poems, address both personal and political issues. While some poems still "evoke love and gratitude, [and] others are notable for their bitterness" [15] towards it, many poems "refer directly to that event [the 1917 Revolution] as well as poems that refer to it indirectly by admonishing her friends who had emigrated".[16] But even in these poems, feelings of isolation, emptiness and melancholy are clearly expressed as under:

> And here, left alone, I
> Am counting the empty days.
> Oh, my freed friends,
> Oh, my swans!
> And I can't summon you with songs
> Nor bring you back with tears,
> But in the melancholy evening hour,
> I'll remember you in prayer.
>
> (Plantain)

Similarly, in Anno Domini MCMXXI, the poems refer to Akhmatova's past relationships and also talk about how wars can have an adverse effect on people's relationships. In the cycle "Dark Dream", the poet "refer[s] to the effects of cold, famine, and war upon her relationship with Shileiko as the years wore on" [17]:

Submissive to you? You're out of your mind!
I submit only to the will of the Lord.
I want neither thrills nor pain,
My husband – is a hangman, and his home – prison.

Well, look here! I came of my own accord...
It was already December, the winds were abroad,
And it was so bright in your bondage,
But outside the window, darkness stood guard.

Thus in the wintry blast, a bird
Beats its whole body against the clear glass,
And blood stains its wing.

(Poem Six)

Thus, it can be seen that Akhmatova's encounters with the grim realities of life have influenced her poetry, which is dominated by a melancholy reflection on life's transience and its sorrows. Akhmatova's love poetry is elegiac if not tragic in nature. The poems speak about the saddest aspects of love — unrequited love, denials, separation, frustrations and loneliness. Her early poetry speaks about the poet's miserable private life — her lonely childhood, her failure in love, the missed opportunities of her life. And her later works, more specifically Requiem and the Northern Elegies, bemoan not only her personal losses (the death of her husband, Nikolai Gumilev, that of her

poet friends Osip Mandelstam and Nikolai Punin and the arrests and exile of her son, Lev Gumilev) and the terrifying experiences of her life but also the cruelty, the suppression, the large scale and systematic purges during the Stalin years of terror. In reflecting the terrible events of those years, Requiem especially, follows the contours of an unconventional elegy mourning the loss and suffering of the poet and the thousands of women who had lost, like her, their sons and husbands at the hands of the Soviet government. It is in this way that Requiem has been hailed by critics like bailey as "an elegy for Russia".

Akhmatova has written over eight hundred poems and has made an ineffaceable mark on the readers of poetry all over the world. Though the bulk of her work is pervaded with intense emotions of grief, despair and mourning, yet, it must be remembered that it never degenerate into mawkish sentimentalism. Her ability to write about her grief in controlled yet lyrically moving lines always reminds the reader of P. B. Shelley's lines that "Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought" as one of her prominent critics, Roberta Reeder had said that her ability to capture the essence of "a character, event, or philosophical idea through a few carefully chosen details"[18] makes her one of the finest poets of the twentieth century.

Endnotes

[1] See Leonid I. Strakhovsky, "Anna Akhmatova –Poetess of Tragic Love", American Slavic and East European Review Vol. 6, No. 1 & 2 (1947): 2.

[2] See endnote 4 in Chapter III.

[3] See Sharon M. Bailey, "An Elegy for Russia: Akhmatova's Requiem", The Slavic and East European Journal Vol. 43, No. 2 (1999) 343.

[4] See C. Hugh Holman, A Handbook to Literature, 4th Edition (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1980) 151.

[5] See Wladimir Weidle, Russian Review Vol. 28, No. 1. (1969) 12.

[6] See Judith Hemschemeyer, trans, "Translator's Preface", The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova (Massachusetts: Zephyr Press, 2006) 2.

[7] See Yuli Aikhenvald, "Anna Akhmatova", Siluety russkikh pisatelei Vol. III (1923) 279.

[8] See Amanda Haight, Anna Akhmatova: A Poetic Pilgrimage (New York & London: Oxford University Press, 1976) 69.

[9] See 6 above. 3.

[10] See 1 above. 3.

[11] Ibid. 2.

[12] See Leonid I. Strakhovsky, "Anna Akhmatova: the Sapho of Russia", The Russian Student Vol. VI, No. 3 (1929) 8.

[13] See 1 above. 11.

[14] See 6 above. 3.

[15] See Roberta Reeder ed., "Mirrors and Masks", The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova, trans. Judith Hemschemeyer, (Massachusetts: Zephyr Press, 2006) 24.

[16] See 6 above. 3.

[17] See 15 above. 24.

[18] Ibid. 33.

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TITLE OF DISSERTATION: Anna Akhmatova as an Elegiac Poet: A Study of Requiem as an Elegy in Relation to the Northern Elegies

DATE OF ADMISSION:	14 AUGUST 2006
COMMENCEMENT OF DISSERTATION:	MARCH 2007
APPROVAL OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL	
1. BPGS	23 APRIL 2007
2. SCHOOL BOARD	26 APRIL 2007
REGISTRATION NO.:	270 of 26 April 2007
DUE DATE OF SUBMISSION:	26 APRIL 2008
EXTENSION:	ONE SEMESTER