

An Ecofeminist Interpretation of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' and 'Lucy poems'

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ABSTRACT

Ecofeminism emerged as a theoretical movement in the last decade of the 20th century. It is not simply a movement; it is an ideology that discusses the fundamental issues and principles of ecology and feminism together and sometimes challenge each other. Throughout the ages both Women and Nature have experienced oppression and domination within patriarchal hegemony and this is what the ecofeminists want to trace out in literary and cultural practices. This article proposes to interpret Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' and 'Lucy Poems' from the perspectives of ecofeminism. Wordsworth is widely recognised as the greatest worshipper of Nature, to whom Nature is the breath and finer spirit, throbbing and pulsating of his heart. Being a foremost Romantic poet, he not only takes Nature as a vehicle to his imaginative faculty but also represents Nature in androcentric ways. In 'Tintern Abbey', Nature is a care-giver; she offers services to Wordsworth, the Man but in reply, he does not give her much prominence except reminding his sister who is also a passive listener. In 'Lucy Poems', Lucy is either dead or silenced or projected as inferior being struck with poverty and pestilence. Ecofeminism which has been the centre of attraction opens up a new vista to represent literature. The traditional interpretation of Nature in Wordsworth's poetry requires critical attention that he was not always sympathetic to Nature and did not completely shake off the masculine identity.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, ideology, androcentric, interpretation.

INTRODUCTION:

Ecofeminism emerged as a theoretical movement in the United States in the last decade of the 20th century. The intellectual and theoretical background was propagated by a Frenchwoman, Françoise d'Eaubonne as early as 1970s. Ecofeminism is not merely a movement; it is an ideology that discusses the fundamental issues and principles of both ecology and feminism and at the same time contradicts each other. At first, both ecology and feminism try to find out the underlying parallelisms between them. "Ecological feminism 'is an umbrella term'", says Karen Warren, "which captures a variety of multicultural perspectives on the nature of the connections within social systems of domination between those humans in subdominant or subordinate positions, particularly women, and the domination of nonhuman nature... 'ecofeminism 'has come to refer to a variety of so-called 'women-nature connections'-historical, empirical, conceptual, religious, literary, political, ethical, epistemological, methodological and theoretical connections on how one treats women and the earth" (Warren, 1994, p. 1).

Ecofeminism brings together elements of green movements and feminism. It takes up from the green movement a concern about the effect of human activities on non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that exploit, oppress and subordinate women in society. Tzaporah Berman's observation in this respect: "The basis of ecological feminism is [the] recognition that the oppression of women and the domination

of Nature in patriarchal society[are] interconnected and mutually enforcing” (Berman, 2001, p. 258). Throughout the ages Women and Nature have experienced oppression and subordination within the so-called hegemonic structures of patriarchal society. This is what the ecofeminists want to trace out how Nature, like Women has been represented in literary and cultural practices. Ecofeminism has opened up a new outlook to look at stereotypical representations differently and encouraged us to interpret with freshness. Traditionally Nature has been imagined and depicted in literature as women identities and women are treated as ‘other’ and subordinate to men folk. The chief concern of the ecofeminists is to figure out the association that domination of women is equivalent to domination of Nature. In this respect Susan Griffin’s words are quite pertinent: “Women have been associated with nature, the material, the emotional, and the particular, while men have been associated with culture, the nonmaterial, the rational, and the abstract” (Griffin, 1994).

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Before the advent and supremacy of Semitic religions there prevailed an Arcadian pattern of life in the world where man peacefully coexisted with nature. Semitic religions, especially Christianity taught mankind to dominate nature, both animate and inanimate. The modern industrialisation, unchecked scientific exploration and technological exploitation entirely swept the pre-Semitic coexistence. Famous ecofeminist activist, Petra Kelly in the forward for the anthology of ecofeminist writings, *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* provides an ideological locale for ecofeminism and lays bare its immediate agenda: “...our aim is a non-violent and ecological feminist transformation of societal structures. Our aim is radical, nonviolent change outside-and inside of us. The macrocosm and the microcosm! This has to do with transforming power! Not power over or power to dominate or power to terrorize but shared power, abolishing power...” (Kelly, 1989). There are mainly five streams noted in ecofeminism: radical or cultural ecofeminism, spiritual ecofeminism, ecofeminist theology, social ecofeminism and socialist ecofeminism. These different approaches are to be taken as sources of strength of the ideology.

According to Simon de Beauvoir, women and nature are the original ‘others’. Beauvoir continues: “Man seeks in woman the other as nature and as his fellow being. But we know what ambivalent feelings Nature inspires in man. He exploits her, but she crushes him, he is born of her, and dies in her; she is the source of his being... Woman sums up Nature as Mother, Wife and Idea, these forms now mingle and now conflict, and each of them wears a double visage” (deBeauvoir, 1968, p. 144). The subordination and oppression of woman and their identification with Nature ran through the canons of literature and even Wordsworth. Jonathan Bate’s book *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and Environmental Tradition* discusses Wordsworth as the first ecological poet arguing that Wordsworth’s politics was neither left or right but rather was ‘Green’. Zhang Shu-Chien Lai in “An Ecofeminist Study of Wordsworth’s Poetry” is not ready to treat Wordsworth thus. He analyses “Wordsworth’s poetry through an ecofeminist lens, positing that his poetic personae reject destructive, masculine superiority and elevate feminine identities when dealing with the natural world” (Lai, 2009, p. 143). He also shows “how the poet struggles to break from patriarchal and imperial attitudes, attempting to promote a symbiotic relationship with the natural world” (Lai, 2009, p. 153).

OBJECTIVES:

- I. To re-read Wordsworth’s poetry from the perspective of ecofeminism.
- II. To show Wordsworth’s anthropocentric appropriation of nature.
- III. To examine his unsympathetic attitude to nature and women in his poetry.
- IV. To explore the voice of suppression and domination.
- V. To decentralise the traditional outlook of Wordsworth’s nature.

FACTS & FINDINGS:

Wordsworth wrote quite a few number of books of poems which very often transcend the factual world and drift into a fictional atmosphere. The basic precepts and approaches in these books are quite inspiring for the new genre of ecofeminism. It is not merely the romantic idealization of nature, but they offer the organic aspect of nature and point out the inseparable bond between nature and its organisms, including human beings. Let us see how ‘Tintern Abbey’ and ‘Lucy Poems’ fulfil the perspectives of ecofeminism. ‘Tintern Abbey’ is mostly treated as championing the poet’s philosophy of Nature. The apostle of Nature here formulates a doctrine. It traces out the gradual development of the poet’s mind and his love of Nature, a thing which has been done at greater length in ‘The Prelude’. Three well-defined stages in the growth of his love of Nature can be found.

First came the stage in which the poet's love of nature was simply a healthy boy's delight. The 'coarser pleasures' of Nature appealed to him. Then followed the second stage in which the sensuous beauty of Nature was loved with an unreflecting passion. This love of Nature became to him as ardent, as fervent, as strong as the love of a man for a woman. He enjoyed nature with the senses. The appeal that Nature made to him was purely sensuous. The poet passed into the third stage which was profoundly spiritual and religious. The 'aching joys' and the 'dizzy raptures' of the second stage were no more. Now a high pantheistic philosophy took hold of his poetic imagination. The gift at this stage of the most sublime aspect is that of that 'serene and blessed mood'. Contemplation of Nature induces in the poet a sense of tranquillity in which the burden of the mystery of life and universe is lifted. His bodily function ceases and the soul becomes extraordinarily illumined. It is his cardinal belief that Nature does never betray the heart that loves her. She is a ministering angel. She is the anchor of his purest thoughts, the guide and guardian of his best feelings, and the mainstay of his moral life. Wordsworth here recalls all the services that Nature as a care-giver offers to man. Nature is the source of joy and pleasure; in "hours of weariness" he feels in the blood "sensations sweet" (28). "The burden of the mystery", "the heavy and weary weight of all this unintelligible world is lightened" (40-2); he gets a relief from the stress and strain of urban life. Nature becomes "a moral guide...a force for tranquillity, adjusting /manipulating the mind to permit the imagination to function well" (Blades 49). Nature is all in all to him. The poet says:

*"I cannot paint
What then I was. The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock
The mountain and the deep and gloom wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite..." (75-80)*

Nature acts as a unifying force working through all things. The poet thus says:

*"A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things" (101-3).*

Thus, he loves Nature only because it is a care-giver, a nourisher. Wordsworth's Nature is the result of anthropocentric appropriation of Nature and this human-centred attitude is what the ecofeminism argues against. Wordsworth rather follows the common tendency in masculine Romanticism. The Romantic poets often attribute male status to both the subject and the object and thus the female presence is ignored in poetic discourse. The female is not given a voice and thus her existence is never acknowledged. This role of Nature as a nourisher is identical with the representation of Dorothy in the poem. As Margaret Homans has persuasively argued (qtd. In A. Mellor) by identifying Nature as female and the female as Nature (or not-human), Wordsworth effectively denied to women the ability to enter what Lacan called the symbolic order. (Homans, 1981) "Rarely allowed to speak for themselves", Anne K. Mellor says, "the female figures in Wordsworth's early poems exist only as embodiments of an undifferentiated life cycle that moves inexorably from birth to death" (Mellor, 1993, p. 19).

Dorothy remains a passive listener, an inferior character, a less conscious self whose function is only to reflect the poet's image, his development and progress. John Blades quite pertinently observes:

"As well as a sister, she [Dorothy] functions as a complex metaphor in the poem of nature, female muse, lover, and even of Wordsworth himself as he had been five years previously. Significantly she is also an 'anchor' of stability in his uncertainty: dependable and loyal, his Fidus Achates, supporter, artist-wife, nourisher. And in her he prays for recognises the same resilient presence as the Wye landscape, the 'steep woods and lofty cliff'. She is his 'mansion...a dwelling place...' (Blades, 2004, p. 54).

Wordsworth thus identifies Dorothy with Nature. This long tradition of 'use' of Nature with Women is reflected in Berman's observation: "Within patriarchal society women have been traditionally associated with motherhood, and therefore responsible for nurturing, caring and giving. Mother's work in turn is unpaid and often unrecognised and devalued in capitalist society...As such, viewing the Earth as mother perpetuates the notion that humans can take without being expected to give back, that the earth is limitless and for human use" (Berman, 2001, p. 263). Dorothy is kept passive, silent, only to let him a chance to present a more chastened human image of his own self. The poem thus fails to shake off androcentricism. 'Tintern Abbey' thus becomes a

celebration of purely male subjectivity in its philosophical discussion and in its representation of Nature. Wordsworth's inspiration and poetic skill were not at their peak during the period when he wrote the five short poems known as 'The Lucy Poems'. He wrote them during his stay in Germany or shortly thereafter, in 1799 and 1801. In considering the poems the following order will be followed: "Three years she grew", "Strange fits of passion", "A Slumber did my spirit seal", "She dwelt among the untrodden ways", and "I travelled among unknown men". This chosen order lends itself to a development of thoughts. These five short Lucy poems are a concrete expression of Wordsworth's philosophy. They tell us the story of a young girl whom Nature took to herself and moulded into the perfect child of Nature, of a child who was perfectly docile and responsive to 'Mother Nature', and finally they tell of Wordsworth's own feelings and reactions toward this child of Nature. There were numerous interpretations about these Lucy Poems-literal interpretation of Lucy as mountain girl whom Wordsworth loved in his youth, interpretation of identifying Lucy with Wordsworth's sister Dorothy, Lucy as Wordsworth's expression of the ideal English maiden and an expression of Wordsworth's Nature spirit. Eric Robertson said: "It is possible, then that Lucy is a mere figment of Imagination, or was some slight crumb of human character highly poetised" (Robertson, 1911, p. 152). The poem, "Three Years she grew..." is one of the Lucy poems and is titled The Education of Nature by Palgrave. It is Wordsworth's masculine voice that is echoed in Nature's desires:

*The child I to myself will take,
She shall be mine, and I will make
A Lady of my own (4-6).*

The sense of masculine superiority and authority is quite obvious in his assertion, though in the disguised personality of Nature:

*Myself will to my darling be
Both law and impulse, and with me
The Girl in rock and plain,
In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,
Shall feel an overseeing power
To kindle or restrain (7-12).*

It is the poet's voice, the voice of a man that is attributed to both Women and Nature. Hence it is the disguised personality of the poet himself that is echoed in the version of Nature. It may lead to a misconception that Wordsworth, the Man identifies himself with Nature and it may go against the proposition that women are identified with Nature. The reality is that Wordsworth only borrows the language of Nature and nothing more and that too to imply his male superiority.

The same close connection of Lucy and Nature is apparent in the other four poems, though not as explicitly. She is described as "fresh as a rose in June" or again, she is:

*A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye!
Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky (5-8).*

After death she becomes an indistinguishable part of Nature's great universe:

*No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stars, and trees (5-8).*

It is not the individual Lucy that Wordsworth is interested in but the individual as a work of nature. Lucy is even more abstract, not been given any concretization of form. Wordsworth's love for Lucy was of a very different type from his love for Annette. It was not passionate; it was like an idealization of abstract thus denying the essential identity of Lucy.

Wordsworth's women are either dead, or mad, or silenced or projected as inferior beings struck with poverty

and pestilence. Lucy is dead, the female is thus deprived of the joy and charm of life, the pulsations of human identity. Even when she was alive “She dwelt among the untrodden ways”, “No mate, no comrade Lucy knew”. Identification of Lucy, the female with Nature is unambiguously stated in “Three years she grew in sun and shower “as she is considered a lovely ‘flower’ and finally Nature calls her into its bosom. The lines definitely assert the male poet’s superior status. Greg Garrard remarks:” Wordsworth’s enthusiasm for ‘nature’ does not correspond to modern ecological concern. Wordsworth is, on the whole, far more interested in the relationship of non-human nature to the human mind than he is in nature in and for itself...Wordsworth spends rather little time describing nature, and rather a lot reflecting upon his own and other people’s responses to it” (Garrard, 2007, p. 43). In “A Slumber did my spirit seal”, Lucy is described as a ‘thing’ and the poet said:

*She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years (3-4).*

In “She dwelt among the untrodden ways”, Lucy is depicted and imagined as someone who is not attractive and devoid of feminine beauties:

*A maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love (3-4).*

The last stanza clearly hints at the social hegemonic structure where a male is given recognition and the world remembers him through his work. In spite of Lucy’s influence on the poet, he said:

*She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;(9-10).*

The tone of ironic insinuation is much transparent than the acknowledgement or sympathy. These poems are androcentric as said before because the poet is more preoccupied with projecting masculine vigour and dynamism. One of the interpretations of the identity of Lucy that she is not one girl, but a composite of many, again points out the androcentric mindset of not acknowledging Lucy as an individual unless it culminates and resists as a collective force. But in these poems Lucy was not given that space so she could become a voice of resistance questioning the male domination and exploitation.

A study of the close relationship between brother and sister has led some critics to conclude that it was the inspiration of the ‘Lucy Poems’. MacLean surmises, at the end of her treatment of the poems, that “these poems are all based on the moods, emotions and states of feeling which were part of the poet’s life with his sister, and which would not have been part of his life with any other woman” (MacLean, 1927). Identification of Lucy as Dorothy presents the proposition that Dorothy did not die young. When these poems were written, Dorothy was very much alive and the joy of William’s association with her was at its height. Coleridge’s guess that “A slumber did my spirit seal” was inspired by a gloomy mood when Wordsworth “fancied the moment in which his sister might die” may be nothing more than a bad conjecture. Mr. Bateson has attempted to overcome this unsurmountable difficulty of Lucy’s death by explaining it away as a psychological escape from the guilt feelings consequent upon the beginning of an incestuous relationship. From the psychological orientation it seems to make Wordsworth either a very morbid or a perverted character. (Bateson, 1954)

CONCLUSION:

Thus Ecofeminism is the off-shoot of two significant movements. As it is an ideology that opposes both anthropocentrism and androcentricism, it focuses on integration, preservation, protection and sustainability of life on earth and the earth itself, for both men and women without any discrimination. The objective of this article has been to review the various interpretations of Wordsworth’s ‘Lucy Poems’, to mark out a new interpretation of the poems in close conjunction with ‘Tintern Abbey’ and finally to evaluate the various perspectives in the light of the one specified in the title of my article and correlate them into a unit. ‘Tintern Abbey’, it was seen, expresses a pantheistic Nature philosophy. The whole universe is permeated and vivified by one spirit which can be called Nature. The Lucy Poems are a concretization of the philosophy of Nature and the relationship between man and woman. In the Lucy Poems, the organic nature of the earth, its biodiversity, the reciprocal nature of living beings and the humbling fact that human being is only a small link in the web of life are all neglected and such a world view is the right move for discussion to the ecofeminists. In this time of ecological crisis, a new interpretation of Wordsworth's poetry through the lens of ecofeminism is justified. I

would like to wrap up with the words of Vandana Shiva, one of the pioneering ecofeminist activists in India: “The recovery of the feminine principle is an intellectual and political challenge to maldevelopment as a patriarchal project of domination and destruction, of violence and subjugation, of dispossession and the dispensability of both women and Nature. The politics of life centred on the feminine principle challenges fundamental assumptions not just in political economy, but also in the science of life-threatening processes” (Shiva, 1988, p. 14).

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