

Deconstructing Wordsworth's 'The Solitary Reaper': Exploring the Text through Feminist Lens

Abstract: *The paper aims at exploration of Wordsworth's feminist stance. The Solitary Reaper has been deconstructed by specifically employing tripartite criticisms of Micheal Foucault, Judith Butler and Eco-feminists to unveil feminist tendencies in Wordsworth's poetry. The researcher analyses the perfect balance point of feminism in Wordsworthian poetry who challenges the norms and patriarchal set up in a subtle but typical traditional manner. The deconstruction has helped to conclude that the everlasting song is in fact an internal voice of female that was rising from the ashes during those times. The significance of women to the society, as depicted in the poem, made Wordsworth predict women future in the society*

Keywords: *Feminism, gender performativity, male dominancy.*

Introduction

The study of Literature with regard to the status of women consistently draws one's focus to several areas where the marginalization and subjugation of women have commonly been witnessed. Before the stir of first-wave of feminism, Romantics were writing about woman as an individualistic gender and an intoxicating soul that's made to be loved and adored. William Wordsworth was a romantic poet whose stance on women has often been associated with his incline towards feminism.

Critics have established different school of thoughts regarding Wordsworth's feministic stance. Anti-feminist critics such as Micheal Foucault view Wordsworth's works to be reflective of male dominancy and male egotism. While, feminist critics including Judith Butler, Toril Moi and Ecofeminists consider his works to be feministic involving aggrandisement of women.

The researcher, in the paper, intends to explore the various dimensions of feminism portrayed in Wordsworth poem 'The Solitary Reaper' published in the Lyrical Ballads using the technique of deconstruction. The technique of deconstruction has been employed to see through the perverse meanings of each line of the poem so as to understand the width and depth of feminist abilities in it. The text of The Solitary Reaper has been chosen to excavate the dynamics of common rural women from Wordsworth's romantic vision. Dorothy and Lucy, the commonly referred to women in Wordsworth, have intentionally been neglected to understand the true scope of women in Wordsworth's poetry. The three theories as points of reference in the research paper are Projection of Performativity by Judith Butler, concept of panopticon gaze from Discipline and Punish by Michel Foucault and eco-feminist's view of Wordsworth's poetry.

Deconstruction of 'The Solitary Reaper'

Any structure whether in social studies, science or literature needs re-thinking from new position to leave demonstrativeness to interpretations (Derrida,1976: 81,158-159). Derrida's aim is to undermine thinking of the reader. By doing this, the reader can observe the text how he wishes, putting in it his own experiences and modifying his understanding.

Silverman (1989:4) defines deconstruction as the reading of texts in terms of their marks, traces, or undecidable features, in terms of their margins, limits, or frameworks, and in terms of their self-circumscriptions or self-delimitations as texts.

'The Solitary Reaper' is deconstructed from feminist point of view and evidences are provided as a warrant that this literary art piece explores the radical activities that were gaining ground as an outcome of women endeavours to emerge as a "feminist" from the "feminine" in the late Victorian era. Toril Moi in his essay *The Feminist Reader* differentiates the two by defining the former as a 'political' position and the later as 'a cultural construct' (117, 122).

Wordsworth in *The Solitary Reaper* portrays woman in a traditionally submissive role of a reaper.

Wordsworth begins *The Solitary Reaper* with a command to 'behold' the beauty, in her loneliness, being unaffected by her surroundings busy in her labour and expressions. From Foucault's view, who believes 'power is everywhere' and power relations are embedded in social life. Life in society, literally from cradle to grave, inevitably involves actions being exercised on others actions (Smart, 2002). Similarly, poet's gaze can be much similar to be panopticon gaze that's meant to observe, control and discipline the submissive.

But, eco-feminists view the woman to be reflective of the beauty of landscape. Eco-feminists argue's that cross-culturally and historically women as opposed to men, have been seen as close to nature because of their physiological nature, social role and psychology (Sherry Ortner, 1974). The poet commands passersby to stop and behold the purity in her utmost purity, when she is absorbed in her labor; or to 'gently pass' so she may not be distracted.

Wordsworth appears to be eulogizing the creatural goddess that cannot be reached but only seen from afar. Reaper's music is so powerful that the surrounding valley is 'overflowing with her sound' (Line 8). The expression signifies Wordsworth to be empowering the freedom of expression of the rural woman, even though it's melancholic. If the text is interpreted through the lens of gender performativity theory, the solitary reaper is 'not only embodied through the poet speaker's relation to the feminine, but also through the speaker's literal analysis of her song' (5 Baker). Sally Baker further asserts that Wordsworth's interpretation of song is entirely rooted in his individual 'musical knowledge.' (5)

Wordsworth was a 'Worshipper of Nature' and treated his women equally to the Nature by appreciating the influential and overpowering ability of both to push forward a human life towards positivity and hope. Looking through eco-feministic lens, who favour's Wordsworth to be essentially a feminist, the solitary reaper's song, with a 'melancholic strain', is enough to inspire the poet and gain his attention from great distance. The song is as profound as the valley where the solitary reaper's tunes are echoing in the surroundings. It might be this profundity that poet fails to comprehend the meaning and words of the song-about which he comments later in poem.

Wordsworth's elevation of the solitary reaper's song, her singular way of expression and communication in rural constraints, suggests that he is heightening the stature of woman to goddesses. Judith W. Page identifies the reaper's song to be symbolic of communal song as it's echoing around the valley. He further argues that the song gives the reaper an agency over the surroundings as its being heard everywhere in the corners (5-6 Baker). Her solitary voice has power and effect that greets and transfixes the travellers; and is heard by them as any influential voice is listened to.

"No Nightingale did ever chant" "More welcome notes to weary bands" ...

"A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard" ... (Lines 9-10, 13-14)

The solitary reaper's song is the focal point of Wordsworth's 'emotions recollected in tranquillity' later on to compose the poem. A reader can imagine how mystical yet humanly the voice would be that broke the ice of the

surroundings entirely. The expression of 'breaking the silence of the seas' (Line 15) can be interpreted as if long buried tales of oppression and sufferings of women were being expressed for the first time. The solitary reaper, finally, dared to speak up despite performing her defined gender role. Her loneliness has been emphasized because she has no support of the world but her message is powerful enough to shake the depths of the surroundings. Moreover, her tune is better than songs of birds like Nightingale and Cuckoo, because of the 'melancholic' emotions it carries and the far-reaching effect it has on everyone. Donelan voices a similar notion that 'speaker's comparison of the solitary reaper's intelligible song to the songs of birds places her within a greater cultural context, rather than dehumanizing her'.

Through Judith Butler's perspective, the appreciation of the solitary reaper is merely for her performance of a culturally defined role where it is typical of women to sing 'melancholic' songs during performing death-like labour in the fields. What's unusual is that the song is gaining power over the onlookers and passer byes.

Foucauldian interpretation of the song appears to be an expression of freedom of an oppressed and imprisoned soul that struggles to be heard. Such anomalies are worth punishment in world of Michel Foucault that's based on traditionally accepted power structures.

The question 'Will no one tell me what she sings?' (Line 17) creates the bone of contention between feminists and antifeminists. Wordsworth has been blamed for marginalizing the woman reaper by feminist critics as he asserts that he is unable of understand the words/content of the song. Here, the whole shift is made from the reaper towards the poet-speaker who is analysing her song. Feminists argue that Wordsworth's comparison of the reaper's song with Nightingale and Cuckoo bird indicate that woman is another caged bird that sings beautifully, yet, is not free. The reaper's song is illegible for the poet because of the communication gap between the two culturally-defined genders or may be the poet doesn't want to understand the words. He is marginalizing the woman reaper rather than eulogizing her and interprets her 'plaintive numbers' as an unknown 'x' in an equation that he is not interested to know.

The poet, based on performative act theory, interprets the reapers song as melancholic because of her appearance, action and performance. The poet is judging her expressions from a male perspective where women are weak and sing of sorrows of life. Maybe the song has happy tunes, yet, the poet is the interpreter here and he is a male. Donelan argues that 'the song of the solitary reaper can be read symbolically in terms of how the poet interprets it, rather than literally' (6 Baker) Donelan applies performativity theory upon the poet and the reaper and envisions the poet to be shaping and moulding the reaper's body according to 'his own projection of her performativity (9 Baker).

To deconstruct the stanza from Foucauldian viewpoint, Wordsworth is unwilling to comprehend the song to discipline the reaper and keep her within the constraints of normalcy.

From Butler's view, the last stanza particularly labels the reaper as 'maiden' reaper. The onlooker poet has engendered the reaper vividly in concluding stanza after detailing each of her actively and consciously done performance in the fields. It seems that poet has analysed her first and then portrayed her as a female maiden who is supposed to brag and sing endlessly in those fields. It appears that poet, as a male, specified her role in life even for the rest of her life; that her being rural female body makes her reap and sing in those lands for an eternity. Sally Baker contends for a similar idea that,

"It is through the illegibility of the solitary reaper's song that she is labelled Maiden." If, according to Butler's theory of gender performativity, one comes to inhabit a gendered body through the repetition of theatrical,

stylized acts, then the repetition of the speaker's acknowledgement of his inability to decipher the meaning of the reaper's song genders her as "Maiden" (11).

Feminists defend the idea that Wordsworth, consciously, employs a male gaze to look at the reaper (as mentioned earlier). He deliberately calls her 'solitary' because that's what society made of her existence. He mocks at her melancholic song purposely to wake up the patriarchy out of their oppressive cultural habits. Wordsworth dismisses the theme of song because he knows he is getting judgmental towards the maiden's song. The song can be about women empowerment that will echo for an endless time frame, as it's something revolutionary. Or the song might be about pain and sufferings of women and humanity that has no end. Sally Baker supports Wordsworth's feministic stance by utilizing Butler's point of view

It's the reaper's performative act that made the poet engender her; not the poet's vision solely. Wordsworth is amazed by how she sings to pass time during her work or may be to give a vent to her feelings in the openness. Butler sees her song to be her performance and it leads to her being called a feminine 'maiden'. More than the poet, the reaper's performance gendered her.

Through Foucault's vision, Wordsworth was right in giving her a normalized identity of maiden who will sing sad or happy songs, with whatever theme, for an infinite time. For woman to be in discipline, that is, to follow the cultural gender constructs, it's imperative to define and label their identities from male gaze, the controlling center of a patriarchal set up. The poet perfectly acts out the role of a male of those times while analysing the reaper and her song.

'I saw her singing at her work, and o'er the sickle bending; — I listened, motionless and still.' (Line 27-29)

Critics vision the sickle to be having 'death-like' quality for the reaper as much as her identity and labour has. The poet seems awed by her skill to face death-like life, without freedom; yet the reaper continues to sing during the labor. It's her acceptance of her subordinate position in society that surprises the poet.

As the researcher in the paper undertook Foucault's view, so, with Foucauldian gaze as a research tool, the poet appears to be analyzing the normalcy of pre-defined gender roles being performed by the subjects of the establishment. He, 'motionless and still', was there as a panopticon to keep an eye on her work and progress.

However, the poet concludes that 'music in my heart I bore, / Long after it was heard no more' (Line 31-32) as if the rising power of women was undeniable enough as it was to challenge the establishment and cultural constructs sometimes soon. Definitely, after the era of Romantics, feminists stole the limelight from 'male' to assert their positive and significant roles in society. Moreover, the poem, if deconstructed to its individual parts, displays a string a pervert societal gaze to reveal the underlying structure of femininity and its labor. Its an awareness of emerging power of the feminine society that has been subjugated for many years. Beyond theoretical frameworks, the last lines signify the power those ambiguous tunes were generating and then spreading through the vastness of Nature.

1. Conclusion

May it be Foucault, Ecofeminists, Judith Butler, Donelan, Nancy A. Jones or others; Wordsworth's poetry depicts greater inclination towards feminism even through perverse portrayals of women-which he intentionally did. Wordsworth understood the cultural constructs of society as well as significant role of women in his personal life, so he voiced through romantic vision the tamed spirits of women that were struggling to act freely.

Time took its toll in later centuries and women found their way to freedom from strict gender-roles. Wordsworth's wisdom was already predicting the future of feminine gender of society who hold equal rights in society today. Even if Wordsworth was not a feminist, he was aware of emerging wave of feminism that will overpower the surroundings, which may appear wordless melancholic tune at first to the society but the impact will be everlasting as much as the song of freedom will be.

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