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Representation of Women and Nature in English Literary Texts

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Abstract

In my paper the author intends to show the bond between women and nature as exemplified in the writings of some canonical English writers as a contrast to some of the women writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Helen Maria Williams, Ann Radcliffe, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Shelley, Jane Austen and Jamaica Kincaid who advocated that evolution could come about not through mastery and subjugation of nature, but rather through harmony and coexistence with nature.

Keywords

Women and Nature, John Donne, William Wordsworth, Lucy poems, Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, Mary Wollstonecraft, Helen

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In this paper the author intends to discuss the intimate bond between women and nature as exemplified in the writings of some canonical English writers. The paper particularly focuses on the writings of John Donne and William Wordsworth, and the ways in which their notions have been countered by two women writers from former English colonies. I suggest that the writers through their literary texts advocated that evolution could come about not through mastery and subjugation of nature, but rather through harmony and coexistence with nature.

Susan Griffin notes that perceptions of the relationship between humans and their environment, in the West, were gendered. Writing the preface to the second edition of her book, *Woman and Nature*, in 1999, she points out that assumptions about women being closer to nature than men are, is as if, woven into the tapestry of European literature, their philosophical and scientific texts, and also their language (ix). Other critics like Gregory Garrard look critically at the binaries that define the relationship of men and women in terms of culture and nature: “men and masculinity are associated with culture, and culture is valued, whereas women and femaleness are associated with nature and both are devalued. These linked valuations lead to a hierarchy, which is then used to justify the domination of women, nature, and all those so associated” (48). Such associations have led to enforcing cultural stereotypes of women, even through literary representations.

English poets have very often, in their love poems, identified the beloved with nature and its beauty, or else have situated them in an ideal landscape from which they may derive, as Christopher Marlowe states in his pastoral, "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" (1599) "delights" that "thy mind may move". Marlowe situates his beloved in the midst of a natural landscape so that she might "live with [him] and be [his] love." He makes her the source of the "pleasures" that "Valleys, groves, hills, and fields,/ Woods, or steepy mountain yields." Similarly, Edmund Spenser in his sonnet 64 compares the intimate pleasures derived from the woman to the natural delights from "a garden of sweet flowers." Even Shakespeare, in his Sonnet 18, asking "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" and then comparing: "Thou art more lovely and more temperate" and later in the poem, "But thy eternal summer shall not fade," although may be ironical and critical of the courtly poetic tradition, nevertheless, acknowledges the prevalent tradition of comparing women's beauties to that of nature.

Culturally, women were also thought to have more intimate relationship with nature because of their gender roles as mothers and nurturers, and their biological roles as procreators. Ancient mythologies of the West, beginning with the Greek, Gaia, or the Roman Cybele have contributed to the representation of earth as a mother because of its fertility and procreative abilities, likening it to a womb. Milton personifies nature as a mother in the lines from his masque, *Comus*:

*Wherefore did Nature powre **her** bounties forth,
With such a full and unwithdrawing **hand**,
Covering the earth with odours, fruits, and flocks,*

*Thronging the seas with spawn innumerable,
But all to please, and sate the curious taste?*

(Lines 710-714)

and, in Book I of *Paradise Lost*, where he refers to fallen angels digging into the earth: "Rifl'd the bowels of their mother Earth/ For treasures better hid" (lines 687-688). William Cowper, similarly, refers to "Her beauty, her fertility" in his long poem *The Task* (Book 1, "The Sofa." Lines 359-61). Another example may be seen in Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*:

*"Dear nature is the kindest mother still
Though always changing, in her aspect mild
From her bare bosom let me take my fill"*

(Canto 2, 325-28)

Metaphorically, we might then say, that English literature generally associated women with nature and landscape either as passive and nurturing, 'mother Earth,' or as a 'virgin beauty.' But new images of controlling and dominating nature emerged in Europe with explorations of new worlds and beginnings of colonialism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when white men began to plunder newly "discovered" lands and their resources, in the name of civilization. These "virgin" lands, as they called them, opened another view of nature (and the native woman) as passionate, wild and uncontrollable. Literature written during these times of colonial expansion often sexualized the conquered lands as feminine.

The well-known seventeenth century English poet, John Donne (1572-1631) who John Dryden censured as "affecting the metaphysics" and Samuel Johnson dubbed, along with

other poets like Andrew Marvell, Henry Vaughan and Abraham Cowley, as “metaphysical poets”, begins his “Eligie XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed,” with a warrior’s cry, addressing his lady as “foe.” But after a few lines he goes on to address her as “my America!” in lines that resonate the sixteenth century extension of British Empire to American islands. Donne’s poem becomes an illustration of Western man’s feminization of nature during the period when English explorers like Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh were “discovering” new lands which were subsequently occupied by European rulers. These explorers were mostly, or more accurately, only men in the court of the “Virgin” Queen Elizabeth-I’s court, who felt the same desire for possession of the newly acquired land as of their “beloved’s” body. The well-known ecofeminist, Annette Kolodny in her landmark studies, *The Lay of the Land* (1975) exposed the ways in which representations of the female body as landscape is used as a rationale for subordinating both nature and women:

...not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification... first explorers to America virtually declared themselves ‘ravished with the pleasant land’ and described the new continent as ‘Paradise with all her Virgin Beauties.’ (4)

All of Donne’s elegies were written during his tenure at the Inns of Court. It is perhaps no accident that the quasi-imperial foray in which Donne himself participated—the military expedition against Cadiz in 1596 (often called the Islands Voyage)—was led by Earl of Essex and Francis Drake, two of the foremost petitioners for the Queen’s favour and regard. The following year he sailed with Sir Walter Raleigh and Essex hunting for Spanish treasure ships in the Azores. By 1580

Francis Drake had "girdled" the globe, and a few years later in 1583 Walter Raleigh laid claim to Newfoundland, "O America! My new-found-land" as Donne eagerly claims about the female body in his Elegie. Drake had petitioned and obtained a privateer's license from Queen Elizabeth I, which was essentially a "license" to plunder "property"/ "new lands" already claimed by Spain. Donne could only be referring to such "licences" in desiring his beloved to "License my roving hands, and let them go,/ Before, behind, between, above, below." This symbolic "intertwining of love and conquest" as Shankar Raman calls it in his essay, "Can't Buy Me Love: Money, Gender and Colonialism in Donne's Erotic Verse," reveals "a fundamental unsureness regarding the object of desire" (136). As a volunteer on the military expedition, Donne sailed for material gain, as he also admits in his poem "The Calm":

*Whether a rotten state, and hope of gain,
Or, to disuse me from the queasy pain
Of being beloved, and loving, or the thrust
Of honour...*

"The worlds which were gradually opening up to the gaze of Renaissance explorers and cartographers," in the words of Catherine Belsey "seemed the appropriate emblem of desire. They were vast, these territories, perhaps limitless and enticing, rich and beautiful" (148). "Such beauteous state reveals," as Donne says, drawing a parallel between the beloved's body and the conquered landscape: "As from flowery meads th'hill's shadow steals." Not only does Donne invert the background metaphor likening the discovered land

to the female body, but Raman says, "coarse cynicism" parodies the pious exultation of colonialism in early modern discovery narratives. Such metaphorical equating of colonial territory to female body by characterizing nature as a beauty, leads to stereotyping female gender, and concealing through flattery, its debasement.

Among the variously perceived images of nature as a benevolent mother, a withholding stepmother, a virgin or a seductress, the maternal imagery, perhaps, initially had a moral purpose of exercising restraint in resource management. Pliny of Rome (A.D. 23-79) warned in Book 33 of his *Natural History* against over mining, "We penetrate into her entrails, and seek for treasures... as though each spot we tread upon were not sufficiently bounteous and fertile for us!" (Web). Similar indictments were expressed hundreds of years later by Smohalla, a nineteenth century Native American of Columbia Basin tribes: "You ask me to dig for stone! Shall I dig under [my mother's] skin for her bones?" (Qtd. in Ruby and Brown 32). For the sixteenth century English explorer, however, the image of the matronly Mother Earth had become transformed and sexualized into the image of an untouched virgin land. Donne reframes the land as an object from which to seek pleasure: "To taste whole joys. Gems which you women use/ Are like Atlanta's balls, cast in men's views." Similarly, the female body, seen as passive and ready to yield pleasure, becomes identified with the landscape when the poet evokes the image of "[A] Mine of precious stones, My Empirie,/ How blest am I in this discovering thee!" The reference to the "Mine," "precious stones," and the "discovering" reduces woman's status to that of a commodity,

or a piece of land to be possessed and colonized by men. A similar example of the Elizabethans' perception of woman as a fertile land that yields pleasure may be noticed in the image of a sensuous Cleopatra that is evoked by Shakespeare's Agrippa in *Antony and Cleopatra*:

Royal wench!

She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed;

He plowed her, and she cropped. (2. 2. 234-6)

The reference to woman as a personal possession becomes obvious in another poem by Donne, "The Sun Rising," where the mistress is identified with "The Indias of spice and mine." Further, there is also reference to the man's claim to the mistresses' body as much as to that of the colonized land: "She's all state and all princes, I." The poem appears to suggest that when pursued by sexual love the female body becomes a natural source of riches. The woman, then like Ovid's Daphne gets metamorphosed into symbolic "laurels" for the man. The mistress' body becomes "productive" like the land and becomes his "possession" where his "seal shall be," as king and master: "My kingdom, safest when with one man mann'd." The irony, however, lies in the fact that, where Daphne had prayed to be saved from Apollo, the metamorphosis only worsened her situation. I would consider this transformation of the woman into a beautiful but muted "laurel" for the man, as more of a punishment for denying the man than an escape from rape. For Luce Irigaray, such mutism is a symptom of historical repression. Silencing women by metamorphosing them into metaphors of land and/or natural

objects has made human and the male distanced from and superior to the nonhuman and the female respectively.

Men and women poets of the period, however, differ quite distinctly in their representation of the earth. Bill Phillips points out that Margaret Cavendish, an advocate for animals and the natural world, describes the tyranny of husbandry and mining and gives voice to nature's grievances in her poem, "Earth's Complaint":

*O nature, Nature! Hearken to my Cry,
I'm wounded sore, but yet I cannot Dye,
My Children which from my womb did bear,
Do dig my Sides, and all my Bowels tear,
They Plow deep Furrows in my very Face,
From Torment I have neither time nor place;
No other element is so abus'd,
Or by Mankind so cruelly is us'd.*

The implicit attitudes of a group of people, therefore, may be supposed to have an effect on the environment, which in effect influences human relationships, and power plays of class, colour, race and gender. To put it in the words of Berry Lopez: "The contours of subjectivity... are moulded by the configurations of the landscapes with which a person has been deeply associated." (Qtd. in Gerrard). The canonical poet of the Romantic age, William Wordsworth has, for ages, been seen as an ardent champion for nature, who sought to ennoble and spiritualize nature, to idealize the portrayal of bucolic lives in his poems. Arnold has seen in him an upholder of the pastoral tradition. But as Garrard in his essay "Radical

Pastoral?" (1996) notes, "any attempt to elevate the subjects of pastoral... any attempts to portray an ideal human ecology, can only be seen as mystification or distortion of reality" (457). A closer look at his poems reveal that Wordsworth exploits the traditional cultural notion of women's subordinate position in the Nature/Culture divide, and transforms it into a transcendent idea. By locating them in an ideal pastoral landscape, he also situates these women in a culture that pushes them to the margins as muted, insensate objects that serve to perpetuate his own sense of self. We may note that in his poem "Solitary Reaper" the song of the reaper does not gain prominence because of some inherent merit that deserves a mention against the pastoral tradition. Rather, the repeated "I," suggests that it is the poet who features prominently in the poem, with the reaper only in the background:

*I saw her singing at her work,
And o'er the sickle bending;—
I listened, motionless and still;
And, as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.*

In "Nutting" again, the unidentified maiden is almost invisible. She is made manifest only towards the end as if in order to naturalize the temperament of the boy. The girl in "To a Highland Girl" becomes another object by being linked to a list of natural objects which she is supposed to embody and transcend. In fact it is the man in his poetry who seeks self-

realization and gratification of his emotional and spiritual needs.

In the words of Marlon B Ross: "Wordsworth joins forces with the disembodied voices of tradition and reaction, for he subtly and quietly reasserts and solidifies the priority of male needs and desires.... and the female always serves that need as the object of his desire (392)." We might take a look at his Lucy poems to understand the fissures of gender defined by his perceptions of nature and its virtues that are criticized by a postcolonial Caribbean novelist like Jamaica Kincaid, in her suggestively titled novel, *Lucy*.

Lucy poems carry forward the tradition of projecting the girl child as an "object" closer to nature, bred and nurtured in nature in order to acquire its virtues of self-restraint, "Of mute insensate things," as he says in "Three Years She grew in sun and shower." Lucy, only three years old in this poem, shall be adopted and groomed by nature: "This child I to myself will take;/ She shall be mine, and I will make/ A lady of my own." But as Marlon Ross states: "The word lady makes little sense when dissociated from its social application, a form of status granted to women of a reputable class and chaste reputation" (399-400). "Grace," the poet says, "shall mould the maiden's form" to make her chaste, virgin and beautiful. The prescription, as if, is to shun the "Strange fits of passion," to refer to another of the Lucy poems. Passion could be only the "lover's" prerogative, or perhaps of those people (it is not mentioned whether men or women) who live in "lands beyond the sea" as the poet draws a contrast between England, and "lands beyond the sea":

*I travell'd among unknown men
In lands beyond the sea;
Nor, England! Did I know till then
What love I bore to thee.*

The implicit suggestion is clear: at home, in England, *and, therefore, not overseas*, is the cherished, virtuous lady:

*Among thy mountains did I feel
The joy of my desire;
And she I cherish'd turn her wheel
Beside an English fire,"*

What is most striking is that, like in his other poems mentioned above where we hardly get to see the girl, here too we never get to see Lucy, even though she is at the centre of the poems, and almost pervades the landscape that is described. In the 1815 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* the Lucy poems are arranged in two separate categories. "Strange fits of passion have I known," "She dwelt among the untrodden ways," and "I travell'd among unknown men," are among "Poems Founded on the Affections"; "Three years she grew in sun and shower," and "A slumber did my spirit seal" are with "Poems of Imagination." The first poem in the series begins in a dream state. The poet-lover refers to the beloved as, "Fresh as a rose in June," and then to his secret rendezvous, "Beneath an evening moon." The rose, a traditional Western symbol of love and loyalty gets conjoined with something completely different, the moon, a traditional symbol of change, and therefore of inconstancy. The lover doubts the chastity of the lady as he gallops towards her cottage: "And all the while my eyes I kept/ On the descending moon." And yet, the moon

with its changing cycles also evokes ancient fertility myths, as also suggestions of “fits of passion” and madness and lunacy. The words “lunacy” and “lunatic,” after all, have their origin in the Roman goddess of moon, Luna.

Jean Rhys, the white Creole Caribbean writer from Dominica responds to early explorers’ perception of the Caribbean landscape, and its women as wild, mad and mysterious. Her novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) represents the pathologization by English gentlemen of Creole female who did not conform to European ideological system, as mad. Situating her novel in the 1830s, Rhys gives evidence of the ways in which white women had internalized conceptions of themselves as closer to nature, and early explorers to the island conceived of it as an untainted paradise. Not only is Antoinette, the heroine, compared to the Jamaican landscape, but her garden in her family estate is given as Garden of Eden:

Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible—the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell.... Orchids flourished out of reach.... Twice a year octopus orchid flowered.... white, mauve, deep purples, wonderful to see. The scent was very sweet and strong...” (6)

The initial description of the tantalizing smell and the colours is reminiscent of early description of the islands by explorers who found the islands both sensuous and exotic, and wild and untamed. We might be reminded that Wordsworth had also evoked the Garden of Eden, original sin, and the fall of man by reference to the “orchard-plot” that the lover goes by before reaching “Lucy’s cot.” The poet-lover, no doubt, fears the loss of Lucy’s chastity to the “strange fits of passion,” and sexual

betrayal. If "strange fits" ends with the possibility of Lucy's death: "'O mercy!' to myself I cried,/ If Lucy should be dead!" the other two poems in the series are like epitaphs to someone who is already dead. Lucy's maidenly nun-like existence: "A maid whom there were none to praise,/ And very few to love," her elusiveness: "A violet by a mossy stone/ Half hidden from the eye!" and finally her death serve as morbid inspiration for the poet: "she is in her grave, and, O!/ The difference to me!"

Writing much later in the nineteenth century, Robert Browning, in his dramatic monologue "Porphyria's Lover" (1836) also relates the story of a woman who brings in passion from the wild nature outside to be killed in the arms of the lover:

*But passion sometimes would prevail,
Nor could to-night's gay feast restrain
A sudden thought of one so pale
For love of her, and all in vain:
So, she was come through wind and rain.*

Browning perhaps refers to an incident that may have taken place in 1818. Nevertheless, the poem does reveal a perverted mindset that would permit the "lady" a fuller expression of her innermost desires only at the risk of her life. The form of the dramatic monologue also does not permit the woman a voice, as is also the case in "My Last Duchess." Wordsworth's Lucy also, in fact, has no voice except in the deleted 1799 MS version of "Strange fits of passion" where there is a reference to "Her laughter light."

Women writers like Jamaica Kincaid from former English colonies, question these ideological impositions on women, and the self-assumed superiority of English men. Kincaid, a native Caribbean writer born in Antigua in 1949, when Antigua was under British dominion, asserts that virtues associated with English women do not hold true with the Caribbeans. Her character, Lucy speaks of a mother [read mother country, as the colonizing country, England] who has internalized English patriarchal ideals, and now imposes them upon the young daughter as “a goddess from an old book” (36) making reference to the tyrannical god from the Old Testament, with only the gender reversed. Kincaid’s eponymous character who is bitter, angry, full of self-doubt, and bold in her expression of such doubts may be understood as a parody of the Wordsworthian Lucy. In opposition to Wordsworth’s Lucy who was subject to male voyeuristic gaze, Lucy Josephine Potter, the narrator and central character of the novel, and an exile from her native colonized island, is herself a voyeur. She has a voice, unlike her Romantic prototype, loud in its opposition to any kind of domination, whether physical or ideological. Kincaid’s Lucy, like her author, is from Antigua, an island politically colonized, and geographically drained of its natural resources by the English. Tourist guides, and even websites describe the island as heaven on earth—the Garden of Eden. Whereas, Wordsworth’s ideal English landscape had been threatened by the rising tourism industry and growing industrialization and urbanization, Kincaid’s Antigua had been plundered of its natural resources. Kincaid’s Lucy is deliberately shifted from a supposedly unspoiled rural landscape to an unnamed Western, metropolitan world to

dramatize her encounter with Western ideals of chaste femininity. We cannot say for sure, and yet we may presume that Lucy Josephine Potter is what the nineteenth century English Lucy would perhaps have turned out to be if she had been allowed a voice. The Caribbean Lucy radically subverts Wordsworth's feminine ideal. David Yost suggests: "Where Wordsworth's Lucy lives in implied harmony with nature, Kincaid's Lucy imagines walking through a field of daffodils dragging a scythe, in order to kill every single one; where the Lucy poem 'I travell'd among unknown men' features a narrator who loves England 'more and more' the farther he goes from it, *Lucy* features a narrator who could scarcely hate England any more than she already does" (154).

Kincaid testifies to the profound ideological impact of English Romantic poetry on women from the colonies. Lucy remembers an incident from her childhood when the colonial curricular indoctrination of English language and values, very much like in India, had forced her to memorize and recite the poem "Daffodils." Her angry response is to the fact that daffodils were not native to Antigua, and she would not see the flowers until she was nineteen years old, and in exile. Her mother is made in the image of the Mother Nature in the Lucy poems, and accordingly is tyrannical in imposing English ideals of chaste femininity. She dresses the daughter in the image of a young girl in a picture that she possessed, a white girl against an English landscape, like the one in Wordsworth's poems. In conformation to Western ideals, Lucy's school is also suggestively named "Queen Victoria's Girls' School" (18). Lucy's departure from the island signals an attempt to escape the rigid and oppressive laws. Ironically, although, the same

ideals come back to haunt Lucy in the image of a surrogate mother, her mistress in the host country, Mariah, a name that evokes the Virgin Mary. Mary, also, not coincidentally happens to be the name of Wordsworth's wife. The maid in Mariah's house reminds us of the image in which the modern Lucy is made: "like a nun... so pious it made [the maid] feel at once sick to her stomach and sick with pity" (11). There is a reference to some unnamed "Great Lakes" in the novel, which Lucy visits with Mariah and her family, indicative of Kincaid's indictment of the Romantic Lake poet:

From my room I could see the lake. I had read of this lake in geography books, had read of its origins and its history, and now to see it up close was odd, for it looked so ordinary, gray, dirty, unfriendly, not a body of water to make up a story about. (35)

Lucy finds the bestowing of such glory on so insignificant a body of water as ridiculous. She also finds ridiculous Mariah and her friends, who come to the lakes only for picnicking on holidays and show concern about the vanishing marshlands, like Wordsworth does in his book, *A Guide through the District of the Lakes in the North of England*. All of them had houses built in these marshlands, and Lucy sarcastically questions their environmental concerns: "Well, what used to be here before this house we are living in was built?" (72).

Lucy has three dreams in the course of the novel, in which she is first chased by daffodils, then by Mariah's husband Lewis, and finally by thousands of people on horseback. The dreams serve as reminders of a history of slavery and colonization, and make her conscious that, like Wordsworth's Lucy, her ancestors had lost their tongue to their patriarchal colonial

masters. She learns that “taste is not the thing to seek out in a tongue, how it makes you feel—that is the thing” (44).

Examples about the “double-bind” of being female and being colonized may also be cited from India, with reference to works by Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, Kamala Markandya, Gita Mehta and others. Even regional literature from India is not alien to the parallels of exploitation of land and women. In Odia literature of the nineteenth century, the novel, *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (1897) by Fakir Mohan Senapati, is a classic example of feudalism, colonialism, and acquisition of land getting narrated in the silence of “Saantani,” the muted wife of a zamindaar. The benevolent “Saantani” speaks, but only once in protest as she becomes witness to the feudal, colonial and sexual exploitation by her husband. But in her silence, can be heard her emphatic resistance to all kinds of exploitation.

We might end with a pertinent statement by Kamala Kempadoo about the perception of male authors:

White womanhood represented the pinnacle of femininity, couched in assumptions of fairness, purity, frailty and domesticity, and black womanhood the total opposite because of its presumed closeness to nature, dark skin, masculine physique and unbridled sexuality... (165)

In contrast, Anne K Mellor notes, women writers of the nineteenth century, like Mary Wollstonecraft, Helen Maria Williams, Ann Radcliffe, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Shelley, Jane Austen and others, were concerned not only with the rights of common men, but also women, as well as indentured servants and slaves. They advocated that evolution could come about not through mastery of nature, but rather through cooperation with nature.

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