

AN ECOFEMINISTIC READING OF THE POEM *A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT*

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Abstract:

Owing to her contributions to the poetical world, Elizabeth Barrett Browning can be rightly called as a feminist writer. Social injustice is the main theme dealt in her poems. Quite different from other poems, *A Musical Instrument* depicts a natural setting. The poem shows a different approach to nature when compared to her other nature poems. The poem is blend with violence and savagery right from the beginning. The present paper aims to read this poem in an ecofeministic light.

Keywords: Social injustice, ecofeministic light, savagery right.

Introduction

As a writer of the Victorian era, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's works were influenced by the characteristics of the age. She, being a feminist writer, was more interested in the life of women during the time. In the Victorian age, women were supposed to live a life centred on their husbands and children. The male world imposed unlimited restrictions on women. Patriarchy and tradition always played the role of a villain in a woman's life. Women were always considered inferior to men. She was brought up in such a way as to be "an angel in the house". The qualities attributed to her were innocence, weak and silence. She was supposed to be a silent listener and a passive sufferer in a male dominated society. This was the concept of women in the Victorian age. The only duty cast upon woman in those days was to keep her husband happy and raise her children for which she was groomed right from her birth. They had to face many inequalities in the society. They were restricted of their rights and privileges. Women were considered merely as properties to be enjoyed by men. They had to endure all indiscriminatio imposed on them by patriarchal society. The only duty of woman was to love, honour and obey her husband and raise her children properly. Even many Victorian writers treated women as angelic figures.

But the question of women's roles and rights were widely discussed among the women writers of the Victorian age. A woman writer of the Victorian age, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was interested in the position of women in society and she used her poems to explore how women are treated in a male dominated society. As a writer of Victorian age, she dealt with women of Victorian era. Her poems were a weapon to fight for gender equality. She gave vent to her aversion towards female oppression through her medium of poetry. She aimed at women's independence. This article aims to read her poem *A Musical Instrument* in an ecofeministic perspective.

Though eco-feminism emerged in the nineteen eighties, its traits can be seen in the poems earlier. We can find such traits in this poem too. Eco-feminism also called ecological feminism examines the relation between woman and nature. Through eco-feminism, we can be aware of the association between women and nature. The philosophy of eco feminism emphasizes how both women and nature are maltreated by patriarchy. Effect of gender on society and social norms are widely discussed here. These social norms created by patriarchy in their favour are really causing misery to both women and nature.

Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. It emerged in the mid-1970s alongside second-wave feminism and the green movement. Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the

same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women.
(From the introduction to *Feminism & Ecology*)

In ancient times, earth was considered sacred and nature was worshipped. Even poets praised the beauty and sanctity of nature. The imagery of 'Mother Earth' was widely used in poems. Human beings depend on nature for their existence. But today, we can see that these human beings who considered nature as their mother, their benefactor, are now exploiting her by all means. There are many thoughts which connect nature and women. Nature is feminized as it possesses many of the feminine qualities. Women are seen as kind, gentle, moral, graceful, simple and beautiful. All these qualities can be attributed to nature- The Mother. More than that, the attributes of reproductive and nurturing roles, fertility, bounty are inherent in both women and nature. Woman as well as nature inspired men to write poetry. Thus many writers connected women and nature in many possible ways.

Far different from all these views, ecofeminists state that it is the oppression faced by both woman and nature in a patriarchal society makes them similar. The degradation and exploitation of nature by human beings and the subordination and oppression of women by men have great connection in ecofeminism. Man's treatment of both nature and women are seen parallel to each other and these parallels are discussed under the context. Ecofeminism demands an environmentally and socially just society where women have a central role and they are free from all restrictions imposed on them by patriarchy. They find the relationship between woman and nature more spiritual and intimate than that with men and nature. "Ecology speaks for the 'other' in human /environmental relationships while feminism speaks for the 'other' in female / male relations" (Judith Plant). Thus, ecofeminism speaks for both the others. It is against all types of domination and craves for a favourable change to both the "others". The poet here introduces the villain of the poem in a most striking manner.

"What was he doing, the great god Pan,
Down in the reeds by the river?"

From the lines above we realize that the hero and villain of the poem Pan is not an ordinary man but a God. But he can't be called a God alone, as he bears the attributes of both God and man. Thus he is referred as "half- god". In Greek mythology, Pan is the God of shepherds. He is commonly depicted as a man with horns, legs, a beard, pointed ears and the tail of a goat. In the poem Pan symbolizes duality of mankind and of art. How Pan can be related to patriarchy is shown in this article.

Right from the beginning of the poem, *A Musical Instrument*, the theme of savagery can be noticed. When we look at the background of the poem, it is the story of an unfortunate nymph turned to reed. A poor nymph disapproves the proposal put forward by Pan. She is then turned into a reed. Pan's anger didn't melt away. Now he showed his entire grudge on the reed. He goes down the reeds by the river and caused much destruction with his hoofs. The depth of ruin he caused is evident from the very first stanza. A pathetic scene of chaos and destruction is portrayed here.

"Spreading ruin and scattering ban,
Splashing and paddling with hoofs of a goat,
And breaking the golden lilies afloat"

He didn't even leave the golden lilies nearby. He destroyed it with the hoofs of goat, creating mental pain and an unpleasant situation. Even the golden lilies couldn't escape from his anger. He tore a reed from the river and "hacked and hewed" it as much as he could until he was quite sure that not even a tinge of life remained there. His actions were so cruel that other beings too became its victims. When he plucked a reed

from the cool bed of the river, the clear water there became dirty. The lilies lay dying. The dragon fly ran away.

“He tore out a reed, the great god Pan,
From the deep cool bed of the river:
The limpid water turbidly ran,
And the broken lilies a-dying lay,
And the dragon fly had fled away.”

From these lines, it's quite clear that both nature and woman are objects of destruction for men. The turbid water, dying lily and fleeing dragon symbolizes how the cruelty of men affect the other living beings here-both in nature and in society. It creates a sort of imbalance in both places. Both nature and woman suffers mentally and physically in the hands of man. In a male dominated society, when a man imposes restrictions on women, or ill treats her, the children, who depend on their mother, too are experiencing the same trauma. It may affect them both mentally and physically. A girl child sees her mother as her role model. Seeing her mother's fate, she even fears to live in this patriarchal society where power is in the hands of men.

Pan is partly man and partly goat. The destructive nature in him is portrayed by the manly nature in him. He symbolizes patriarchy, from whose clutches women crave independence. Likewise from the cruel hands of Pan, the unfortunate nymph desires to attain freedom.

Though a beautiful instrument is made out of the reed, to console himself, the action of Pan cannot be justified. It was the result of his anger which caused the birth of a musical instrument. He cuts the reed and makes holes out of it. He claims that it is the only way that Gods could make sweet music. Elizabeth Barrett Browning is very selective in choosing words to show the ruin caused by Pan. “Spreading ruin” and “hacked and hewed” strongly emphasizes the destruction caused by Pan.

When sound evolves out of the flute which Pan made, the music seemed, “Piercing sweet and blinding sweet”. The meaning is quite clear that the music may be good but not completely beautiful as it bears the tears of the nymph. The feminine quality of patience is used to describe the reed “the patient reed.” Like the reed the woman in a patriarchal society silently suffers all the rules and restrictions imposed on her by patriarchy. Both nature and women patiently suffers all the pain.

The Gods who lament on the pathetic plight of the nymph shows the people who have only the role of mere spectators in a patriarchal society. Like the Gods, they may have sympathy for the victim, but they are incapable of helping her from the cruel hands of patriarchy. They could only watch it and laments for her silently. Thus both nature and women are oppressed. They are exploited by men only for their needs.

Conclusion

Pan's actions portray how pitifully nature suffers the pain he inflicts upon them. Even the animals are not free from his atrociousness. Both nature and women suffer the pain thrust upon them by men. Here the nymph, only because she disapproved Pan's proposal, had to pay with his life. Here Elizabeth Barrett Browning wanted to show, like women, nature too was not allowed to have an independent identity or thought. As women's thoughts were controlled by patriarchy, here the nymph's thoughts and dreams were crushed by Pan, her admirer. The tendency of man, seeing woman as his possession is applied here. He wanted to possess her solely, but her own dreams didn't allow her to accept his proposal. This was the condition of women. She could never have an opinion of her own, regarding her marriage. A woman who expressed her own thoughts was seen mad by the society. Those who tried to resist the decision taken by patriarchy was severely punished or even killed. Nobody was dared to question the norms imposed by patriarchy.

The thoughts of an aggressive man worked in the minds of Pan. The godly nature in him diminished. What he couldn't gain shouldn't be possessed by anyone else. Ultimately he succeeded in

working out his plan. He just wanted to achieve her. He gained her in the form of a musical instrument. Here nymph symbolizes woman, who is seen as a musical instrument who gives pleasure to those who plays on it and listens to it. They derive pleasure by playing on it. The exploitation of women was seen as part of the culture. Men find music in the cry of women and it gives them pleasure. In every way, Pan can be symbolized as patriarchy.

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