



Restrictions of Female Potential in the Selected poems by W.B. Yeats

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Abstract- W.B Yeats is considered one of the greatest poets of the late 19th and the early 20th century, and he is still celebrated even in this prosaic and scientific age. He enjoyed a considerable place among the literary figures of his contemporary age. Many of his poems represent women's nature and embody his own attitude towards them. It is very difficult to comprehend his real attitude towards women, for he blows hot and cold in his views regarding women. However, this essay attempts to explore Yeats's attitudes towards female's role in society and restrictions of female potential in some of his poems.

Keywords: Poetry, W. B. Yeats, women, restriction

I. INTRODUCTION

W. B. Yeats is among the most celebrated poets of his time. He has written his poems on different themes; one such theme is the representation of women where he shows his attitude towards women. Like the Western tradition, says Eagleton (1985) where women are considered as an oxymoron, having both negative and positive attitude like devil and saints, beast and angel, Yeats also consider women in both the ways resolving which is difficult. Understanding his attitude towards women is really a complex one. He loved his country but also loved women. In this study, three of Yeats's poems: 'No Second Troy' (1908), 'A Prayer for My Daughter' (1919) and 'Easter, 1916' (1916) have been selected for analysis. All these poems in some ways reflect the circumscription of female potential and criticism on woman's beauty. 'No Second Troy' is one of Yeats's widely-read poems. In this poem, he expresses his resentment over the instillation of violence in the Irish Independence Movement by his beloved, Maud Gonne. He also ironically criticizes Gonne's beauty and her aristocratic standards that mismatch with the age she is living in. In 'A Prayer for My Daughter', he also discusses women and the exuberance of beauty has been criticised. Yeats prays, may his daughter not attain too much beauty, lest she should fall victim to some dangers in future. He fears that the same excessive beauty in her will presents a harrowing look to those who will come across her. The way Yeats longs for the limits to the beauty and nature of his daughter betoken that Yeats restricts females to femininity. In 'Easter, 1916', Yeats criticises women and her rising voice. He considers it intolerant. In the following section, the three poems have been discussed as to how women are dealt with by Yeats.

II. METHODOLOGY

This essay owes a favor to the work of Stuart Mill *The Subjection of Women* (1861), in which he criticizes the 'legal subordination of one sex to the other'. He believes in the equality of both the sexes: male and female. He asserts that this 'subordination' is 'wrong in itself' and creates an obstacle to 'human development'. He looks for an ideal 'principle' in which both sexes would enjoy equal 'social status', and no sex would get away with the privilege or priority over other (p.7). Mill also discusses how man and patriarchal society curb the potential and attributes of women. Mill's work offers a useful tool to understand the three poems by Yeats given below.

The primary focus of the essay is on 'No Second Troy' (1908). In addition to 'No Second Troy', the essay analyses the other two poems: 'A Prayer for My Daughter' (1919) and 'Easter, 1916' (1916) to highlight how Yeats delimits the potential of the female.

III. ANALYSIS

Although Yeats does not mention Gonne's name explicitly in 'No Second Troy', yet he begins with the lines, 'Why should I blame her that she filled my days/ With misery' (1-2). These lines are indicative of Maud Gonne, his beloved in a vaguely referential way. Yeats's lovelorn life finds some expressions in this poem. Brian Arkin (2011) says Yeats's poetic career was affected by his failure in love with Maud Gonne. He produced much less 'lyrical poetry' than expected him after being finally rejected by her. Many critics and readers have considered 'No Second Troy' as a love lyric with a mild satire on Maud Gonne's personality. John Unterecker comments on 'No Second Troy' in *A Reader's Guide to W.B Yeats*, that this poem deals mainly with the admiration of Maud Gonne's beauty. He says that she is described 'as beautiful as Helen', the fictional heroine of the Trojan war (Unterecker, 1965). Although critics claim that 'No Second Troy' is mainly addressed to Maud Gonne's beauty, there are some clues in the poem that present it as a satire on Maud Gonne's masculine and domineering personality.

Some of his early love poems are addressed to the admiration of Maud Gonne's personality and her beauty. Furthermore, he shows utter submission to his beloved in these poems. It is in 'He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven'(1899) that we read the lines, 'I have spread my dreams under your feet;/Tread softly because you tread on my dreams' (7-8). These lines present Yeats worshiping his beloved and show his symbolic surrender to her. However, his poems that emerged somewhere between 1908 and 1921, he represents Maud Gonne in a critical way, often criticising her beauty and arrogance. 'No Second Troy' and 'A Prayer for My Daughter' might have been his reaction to Maud Gonne's refusals of his persistent proposals. In fact, 'A Prayer for My Daughter' appeared shortly after he was finally rejected. We see love-sick Yeats before Maud Gonne's marriage with Sean MacBride and the lovelorn Yeats after that marriage. Some writers say that Yeats was obsessed with Maud Gonne's beauty to the extent that he even proposed to her daughter, Iseult Gonne. Martin insists that 'No Second Troy' is an entirely different picture from what his other love poems are; we see Yeats's 'assertive voice' and aggressive tone find expression here. Martin further argues, 'No Second Try' 'is the blend of the public and [Yeats'] private life'. On one side, there is 'his own long relationship with Gonne and on the other side we see 'the burning city.' Maud Gonne is the catalyst for teaching 'violence' to the 'commoners' and she is the 'Petrarchan object for male's desire' (Martin, 2002). Martin's argument can be extended to the idea that 'No Second Troy' is both the expression of his bitterness over her marriage with MacBride as well as Yeats's dismissal of her personality. Martin gives it an autobiographical touch. However, his words 'Petrarchan Object' seem to reduce her value to an object of catharsis for a man's sexual appetite. This is what Yeats may ultimately be wanting. By the time when Yeats wrote this poem, Maud Gonne had already broken up with MacBride, still, it did not abate his disappointment over her marriage with MacBride. The poem also shows that he is tired of her masculine attitude. Her beauty is compared with the 'tightened bow' (8) a kind of beauty that is unsuited to the age she is living in. It shows that Yeats is critical of her manliness in 'No Second Troy'. He uses the following verses to describe her beauty in 'No Second Troy'.

With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
That is not natural in this age' (8-9).

But his early life shows that Yeats loved maleness in Maud Gonne's persona. This is not easy to understand what induced Yeats to blame her for exercising violence and criticize her for her mannish attributes. Yeats thinks that Gonne's masculine attitude and her aristocratic standards in 'No Second Troy' do not fit this modern prosaic world. The aesthetic sense of Yeats and his people becomes a malediction. Like the Greeks who bewitched by the beauty of Helen's eyes, hurled themselves in the fire of war, the Irish are the victim of their mad zeal. Her beauty has a tragic grandeur in her personality but it is unsuited to the age. He incriminates Maud Gonne for instigating the common Irish people towards the instability of Ireland. W.B Yeats was a pacifist by nature. He did not want Ireland should experience any jolt through violent ways propagated by Maud Gonne and other allies. He believed Ireland would peacefully attain glory in the future. However, at the last phase of his poetic career, he was disillusioned by his hopes that he had held for Ireland's future in his early poetry. Zwerdling (1965) writes in his book *Yeats and the Heroic Ideal* that in his later poetry, Yeats often ridicules his former optimistic hopes for the future glory of Ireland. Zwerdling's statement indicates that Yeats was displeased with the exercise of any barbarism or wild heroism in seeking independence or getting rid of the British Empire. Of course, Yeats was a nationalist and he showed some political interests in his early life, however, Yeats was not in favour that women should intrude on the masculine regime. He reduces the potential of femalesto their female domain.

'No Second Troy' is a satire on women in terms of dismissing and reducing their authoritative personalities. For Yeats, power and authority are the possessions of man. Although Yeats loved that masculinity in Maud Gonne's personality, yet he wanted her to be the blend of both feminine as well as masculine traits. Yeats's poems show that Gonne was deficient in possessing normal feminine attributes. Yeats believed that women's masculine attitude should solely serve to attract men. He himself was sexually attracted to Maud Gonne's masculine features which he praised with great details in some of his poems. As Wilson writes about Yeats that he was always sexually attracted towards Maud Gonne's masculine features but her marriage with MacBride made him 'semi-sadistic' and harsh. The distance between Maud Gonne and Yeats increased considerably. They also became antagonistic towards each other (Wilson, 1972). Sook underpins Wilson's idea, Sook writes, 'In Yeats's poems the persona blames the women for their violence', stressing that women should be sexually attractive, they should have manners, wit, and should possess 'no intellectual hatred' (Sook, 2006). The preceding comments of Wilson and Sook provide reasonable evidence that Yeats grew critical of Maud Gonne's manliness. Furthermore, he had sexual desires, and the deprivation of sexual intercourse with Maud Gonne may have made him sarcastic towards her. Yeats believed, women should make provisions for satisfying men's erotic desires.

Cullingford writes in her book, *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry*, men in Yeats's times have feared that the women who had been oppressed by the patriarchal society might launch reciprocal oppression on their male counterpart if they would get the fruit of emancipation (Butler, 1996). This was the masculine anxiety in the early phase of the twentieth century. It means Yeats dislikes women's dominance. In other words, it may be said that Yeats check their (females) advancement towards the masculine regime. We also see such glimpses of satire in 'Easter, 1916'. Yeats criticises the rising voice of women in an age that is intolerant to the shrill voice of women. The following lines from 'Easter, 1916' highlight his satire over the voice of the women who were active in the rebellious campaign against English rule over Ireland.

That woman's days were spent
In ignorant good-will,
Her nights in argument

Until her voice grew shrill. (17-20)

Yeats's treatment of the women in this poem is negative. He believes women should have a low voice and their beauty should attract the men looking at them. He dislikes their interference in the political campaigns since this interference mars their feminine nature. Thus, Yeats confines women to their specific gender roles. For Mill, men adhere to 'women's disabilities' in order to maintain their [women's] subordination', since 'the generality of male sex does not admit' the notion 'to live with an equal' (Mill, 1986, p. 53). Although the word 'ignorance' in the context means; the women's plan was imperfect to execute the revolutionary campaign, it implies that Yeats laughs at the ignorance of women. In other words, the word 'ignorance' in the above lines represents his mockery over the intellectual weakness of women. We can say that women, according to Yeats, have intellectual ineptitude. Yeats stresses the point that women should keep their voices low. Their nimble activities are but transgressions into man's land. As Mill points out in *The Subjection of Women*, Some women go radically against their subordination led by 'the most eminent woman' speak in the parliament for their 'suffrage' (Mill, 1986, p. 19). Yeats probably disfavours a woman's overarching power that jeopardises man's ascendancy. Mill's statement about women's suffrage may be applied to Maud Gonne and Constance Markievicz who led the women to seek emancipation from the clutches of patriarchal power. Yeats, as mentioned in the essay elsewhere, was displeased with women's role in politics. In 'Easter, 1916, he shows his displeasure over the rebellion caused by the rebels. The lines 'Too long a sacrifice/ Can make a stone of the heart.' (57-58) show that Yeats reduces their hearts to a stone that has no emotion or love but an obsession that haunts it regularly. The sacrifice is Maud Gonne's inordinate services for the revolutionary ideals. Jeffares says, 'The stone was a symbol of how politics had affected, in particular, Maud Gonne' (Jeffares, 1971). However, Yeats does not restrict his characterization of women in 'Easter, 1916', he feminises the male character as well. He uses the character of MacDonagh to praise his feminine idiosyncrasy.

He might have won fame in the end
So sensitive his nature seemed,
So daring and sweet his thought. (28-31)

These lines depict that Yeats not only admires the embodiment of both feminine and masculine traits in females but he also praises this composition in males. The word 'sensitive' and 'sweet thought' represent

femininity, so, Yeats feminises MacDonagh's manliness. This is an indication that Yeats loves both male and female features in a person.

There might be feelings of negative capability in Yeats since he did not possess the features which Gonne had, so, Yeats might have wished for those features of hers. As Alison says, in a review of the book by Cullingford, '[Yeats] himself had considerable difficulties in becoming a man. He inherited the conventions of male-dominated love poetry during the crisis of gender relations'. He wrote at a time when 'the position of women' being 'uneducated and without franchise was challenged' (Allison, 1997). Therefore, it may be confidently argued that Yeats longed for those features in himself which he saw in Maud Gonne. Jeffares differentiates Yeats and Maud Gonne's personalities in *Profiles in Literature* (1971) says, '[Yeats] was shy, delicate and poor, [Gonne] full of self-confidence, energetic and independent... Her beauty, her great height, her power over crowds seemed to him incredibly distinguished, her face like the face of some Greek statue.

Yeats was diffident while Maud was confident. Her personality was enviable for Yeats. But his failure to achieve Maud Gonne or her features might have made him critical against such features in her. Yes, it is true, he fell in love since these qualities in her have fascinated him but it may be said that he dismisses these qualities as they are destructive to this modern age. He compares her beauty to the beauty of Helen, the heroine of Trojan war, whose beauty has caused the burning of Troy. That is why he dislikes these features in Maud Gonne's personality. Yeats himself was made miserable by her beauty and her body's elegance, therefore, in 'No Second Troy' he projects his own misery onto the future of Ireland. All this discussion suggests that women's beauty has a destructive nature, a beauty that corrupts the intellectual capacity in men. Yeats reduces the potential of a female's beauty to destructive power. Bernard Shaw too, an illustrious contemporary of Yeats, calls women 'Boa constrictor' which destroys the capacity of man to become a superman (Shawn, 2008). Yeats is consistent with the criticism of women's surplus beauty. This beauty has also been criticised in 'A Prayer for My Daughter' but there too exuberance of beauty has been criticised. Yeats prays, may his daughter not attain too much beauty, lest she should fall victim to some dangers in future. He fears that the same excessive beauty in her will presents a harrowing look to those who will come across her. The way Yeats longs for the limits to the beauty and nature of his daughter betoken that Yeats restricts females to femininity. It may be said that he is acting within the concept of patriarchy. Yeats even robs his daughter of her natural feminine beauty by saying, 'May she be granted beauty and yet not' /...Being made beautiful overmuch' (17-18). Yeats believes that too much beauty in women creates pride which translates into intellectual hatred. He uses these lines to describe intellectual hatred, 'An intellectual hatred is the worse, /So let her think opinions are accursed' (57-58). Arrogance and intellectual hatred in them cause them to be opinionated, and inexperienced in their judgment. Yeats in the following lines indirectly blames Maud Gonne for her poor choice of choosing MacBride as a life partner. He says,

While that great Queen, that rose out of the spray,
Being fatherless could have her way

Yet chose a bandy-legged smith for man. (27-29).

The above lines allude to mythology, indirectly suggest that Yeats laughs at the choice Maud Gonne had made to marry MacBride. The words above 'Being fatherless could have her way' may be descriptive of his implicit faith in a male's intellectual superiority over a female. As Albright says in notes on this poem, 'Fatherless: perhaps a sly suggestion that only a father's counsel prevents a daughter from going astray' 623. Albright's comments may be taken in the context of a man's authoritative nature who interdicts any intellectual enlightenment coming towards a woman. In other words, we may say that it is Yeats's own male chauvinism that he depreciates women's excessive beauty or intellectual power. Yeats's belief is traditional in the sense that women are intellectually inferior to men. Yeats's opinion is anatomical as well, assuming that women are biologically inferior to men. Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women* rejects the anatomical assumption of the intellectual capacity in any of the sex, as anatomy tries to establish by saying that a man's brain is larger than that of a woman. 'The larger the brain, the higher is the intellectual power' (Mills, 1986).

Another point can be noted, when he speaks in the concluding stanza, 'And may her bridegroom bring her to

a house/ Where all's accustomed, ceremonious; (73-74). He wishes an aristocratic husband for his daughter, so, that his daughter would depend on her affluent husband. This means he delimits his daughter's scope of life and confines her to a woman sitting within the circumscribed boundaries of the house. Because an aristocratic husband would delimit her significance in his life. Yeats reminds us of the glimpses of aristocratic standards of 19th- century Victorian society where a woman is treated as an object.

Ramazani (1993) says, Yeats, like the 'Pre-Raphaelites of his and his father's circle, was preoccupied with the icon of the disempowered women'. Like other male poets, Yeats turned to the 'aesthetic representation' of women in his poems, after sensing a threat to lose 'social control' over the women around him. He creates the opposites of 'unmasterable women' around him' (Ramazani, 1993, 67). So, the new woman he creates in his poems would be a fictional woman that can be easily tamed. The beauty of Maud Gonne is so penetrative that it becomes too unmalleable for Yeats to be dispensed with in his life and poetry. However, Yeats, as Ramazani argues, was at the same time scared to be overpowered by the dominant woman. 'No Second Troy' then, reflects the possibility of Yeats's encomium of her beauty turning into an ironic satire over her beauty, poise, and her stern attitude. The satire extends further as he concludes the poem, Yeats says:

Being high and solitary and most stern?

Why, what could she have done, being what she is? Was there another Troy
for her to burn? (10-12)

Yeats calls her 'solitary and most stern?', both these words are implicitly suggestive of masculinity. 'Solitary' shows the independent personality of a woman and this independence is criticised because a woman's independence leads to the weakness of patriarchal power. The enervation of the patriarchal power blurs the distinctive line between man and woman's social power, so, Yeats wants to preclude the possibility of the emergence of both the genders having equal social status and power. He wants to feminise the female gender. The word 'stern' is her inexorable ego which never yielded to the poet's sedulous pleas. Maud Gonne's beauty is 'like a tightened bow' (9) that gives a metaphorical meaning; the 'tightened bow' is associated with Greek chivalry. Then it represents masculine power and bravery. Yeats grows critical against bravery and masculinity that defile the crux of femininity. He does not like the overarching personality of women. As mentioned early in the essay, women, for Yeats, should be polite, courteous, and sexually attractive. This proves that even though Yeats's poetry is abundant with the commendations of women's personalities, yet he is intolerant towards their dominance and treats them as the telos for sexual gratification.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we may say that Yeats' poetry is divided between the appreciation and the criticism of women. On the one side, we see the praise of Maud Gonne's personality and on the other, we see overt criticism of her beauty. Therefore, we may infer from these three poems that Yeats not only delimits women's potential but also tries to open up a marginal space for their improvement along his carefully charted lines.

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