



Research Paper

## Predicament of Women in Seamus Heaney's Poetry: A Reading

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### ABSTRACT:

From the very dawn of human civilization women have been presented as marginalized and subjugated sexual human entity in literature, myth, religion and many other divers type of texts. The tradition and practice continue from ancient Homer to recent Heaney, from mythic Byas Deva to modern bards belonging to diverse far-flung cultures languages and society. So many words are spoken in support of the rights and liberty of women, but their destiny have never changed. Whenever they have been presented by the male authors, the fair sex has often been presented either as subordinate tool to fulfil patriarchal whims and their needs and necessities or with contempt and criticism until the feminist movement started in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century for justice, liberty equality and equity for women in all spheres of life in human society. Seamus Heaney, being a contemporary Irish poet is deeply emersed in and involved with diverse contemporary national and international issues and troubles, gives vent to his subjective as well as universal views and visions regarding history, myth, politics and cultures of the world countries and communities. As a part of his humanitarian views, his poems also recount to the barbarous unrecorded history of depravity, exploitation, tortures and subjugation of women throughout ages. The paper upholds the picture of a universal phenomenon of women's predicament starting from his maiden anthology *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) to the final book of verse *Human Chain*(1910).

**KEYWORDS:** marginalized, subjugated, exploitation, depravity, humanitarian

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### I. INTRODUCTION:

Seamus Heaney, one of the greatest world poets, born and brought up in Ireland and later shifted to England to fulfil his literary ambition, was one of the finest English language poets. A Nobel laureate, Heaney was never circumscribed by any sort of isms, opinions or criticism of others. He was a free soul and expressed his truthful visions and views about the world and the human society. As a part of his observation Heaney upholds the sad and pathetic picture of the fair sex in his poetry. The paper tries to locate the predicament of women by drawing references from his poetry as well as providing part of comments and opinions of great men of letters and critics to justify Heaney's observation of feminine depravity. Heaney presents the subjugated, marginalized state of the women from prehistoric age to the present century. Patriarchal dominance over and violence against women can distinctly be visible in Heaney's poetry right from his maiden anthology '*Death of a Naturalist*' (1966) to the final book of verse '*Human Chain*' published in 2010.

### II. METHODS AND MATERIALS:

The continuity of the phallogocentric notion of male superiority and female subordination and the logocentric idea of masculine God as 'He' is strongly and pervasively generated in Heaney's poetry, probably as a process and part of collective unconscious of which he may be or may not be aware of. Or it may be that he intentionally projected the degenerated state of women to look at the issues critically. In his poetry, social and political violence get entangled with the violence against women. In his poetry, very often, we find the masculine figures who love the feminine stereotype in their daily life of love, affection, obedience, tolerance or sacrifice and presents the narratives of male activities or actions, be it personal, familial or national. In social and political life, women have been 'given' a very marginalized position to play their role. Heaney was wholly conscious of the perennial male prerogatives and phallogocentric pattern of history and literature. In spite of having this vast range of knowledge of history and literature, his poetry falls short in expressing the plight of

women. Many great poets of past and near past openly criticize women in a very crude manner which can't be justified by any logical argumentation. Even as great as a philosopher and critic like Aristotle described women's role and position in a very mean and degraded language. In his famous book *Politics* he states, "as regards the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject".<sup>1</sup> In *The History of Animals* Aristotle further claimed that women are "more mischievous, less simple, more impulsive...more compassionate...more easily moved to tears...more jealous, more querulous, more apt to scold and to strike...more prone to despondency and less hopeful more void of shame or self-respect, more false of speech, more deceptive..."<sup>2</sup> Even Shakespeare ridiculed and harshly attacked women by saying, "Frailty, thy name is woman".<sup>3</sup>

### III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION:

As regard to atrocities against and subjugation of women in Heaney's poetry Patricia Coughlan points out that in many of his poems, women are the active catalyst who not only 'dooms, destroys, puzzles and encompasses the man, but also assist him to his self-discovery: mother stereotype, but merged intriguingly with the spouse'<sup>4</sup>. One of the germinal poems of Heaney is 'Digging' which is included in his maiden anthology *Death of a Naturalist*. It functions as a tour de force throughout his poetic journey. 'Digging' is a rhetoric tool, a poetic prism which creates vertiginous possibilities in the semantic of the text. Digging denotes diverse possibilities. The connotation is more than specific metaphorical destinations. Through digging the poet unearths the violent cultural past. The ferocity, barbarity and brutality of man upon man in the name of religion and ritual are the focal point of 'Digging'. The metaphor indicates a painful return to the root. For the poet, cultural digging replaces manual digging of his forefathers. It also connotes that the poet is digging deep into the soul and psyche, the racial memory of his people. But what is amazing, most of the critics, ironically who are mostly men, as well as the poet himself, never mention its phallogocentric metaphorical connotations. That the plough which is vibrant and active represents itself as a symbol of phallus, dominant male archetype and the earth which is being ploughed represents itself as reticent, submissive female. Again, Heaney views the creative process as specifically a male activity in 'The Forge' - the violence and the archetypal maleness of the poetic persona leading to the suggestion that the truth of art is forged out of violence and brute force. But the poetic process of seeing things in the later poetry is a more spiritual, even intuitive practice. In another of his poem 'Valediction' the woman is not only presented as the source of stability in the speaker's life, but she is in complete control of the relationship. Nevertheless, the image of the woman is traditional and somewhat stereotyped: an object of beauty defined by dress and prettiness and the natural allusions such as the frilled blouse, the smile, and the 'flower-tender voice'. Hence, in the poem, there seems to be a traditional visual concept of woman, combined with a more varied understanding of roles, both as loving as well as controlling force. In 'The Shrunken' woman is presented in far more bitter and cynical way. Woman is presented as mere sexual objects, alluring, exciting in a primitive, animal way: 'stirred/By the soot fall of your things at bedtime'. Here she is an object of male desire, observed with controlled voyeurism by the speaker.

In Heaney, earth, the nature and the physical territory and political spirit of Ireland is viewed as feminine entity. There is a hint of this in soft, preserving womb-like quality of the earth in the poem 'Bogland'. This feminine aspect becomes explicitly sexual in such poems as 'Rite of Spring' and 'Undine' in *Door into the Dark*. The timid, passive yet willing female sex and psyche is presented through the image of a water pump: 'It cooled, we lifted her latch, / Her entrance was wet, and she came'. This masculine narcissism is even more apparent in 'Undine', which ventriloquizes the water-nymph's voice:

...And I ran quick for him, cleaned out my rust.  
He halted, saw me finally disrobed...  
Then he walked by me. I ripped and churned...

He explored me so completely, each limb  
Lost its cold freedom. Human, warmed to him.  
(*'Undine'*, *Door into the Dark*)

But the females have been shown as destructive to such poems as 'The Tollund Man'. As Simone de Beauvoir put it, "One is not born, rather becomes, a woman....It is civilization as a whole that produces that creature....which is described as feminine."<sup>5</sup> This is true to poetry of Heaney as long as the role of society in female deprivation is concerned. In many of Heaney's poems even the language itself is supposed to reflect male prerogative and male bias. The conceit of language as erotically enabling joined in the skeletal passage of 'Bone Dreams' with the female body as landscape in a political conceit. The Irish poet colonizes a female England with his magical charm of language. He upholds himself as the phallic 'chalk giant':

Carved upon her downs  
Soon my hands, on the sunken  
fosse of her spine

move towards the passes.

(‘Bone Dreams’, *North*)

The persona ‘estimate for pleasure/ her knuckles’ paving’, and begin ‘to pace’ her shoulder. Of course, in the process of amorous activities male plays the active role and women as a passive object. Representation of women as a degraded, submissive, sexual object is vividly manifested in such poem as ‘Come to the Bower’ which combines the commonplace image of disrobing with richly sensuous setting of landscape which is one of Heaney’s most characteristic features:

My hands come, touched

.....

To where the dark-bowered queen,

Whom I unpin,

Is waiting.....

(‘Come to the Bower’, *North*)

The act of unpinning encodes her disempowerment and at the same time it creates a pornographic effect of disrobing the woman. This determines her role as an erotic object, used for fulfilling the lust of man. At the end of the poem the attack becomes uglier when the woman is reduced to a commercial commodity, presented in terms of market price:

I reach....

to the bullion

Of her Venus bone

(‘Come to the Bower’, *North*)

Violence and atrocity against women get frightening in Heaney’s ‘Strange Fruit’. The poet presents awful picture of a murdered girl, ‘Here is the girl’s head like an exhumed gourd.’ The last four lines are terrifying:

Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible

Beheaded girl, outstaring axe

And beatification, outstaring

What had begun to feel like reverence.

(‘Strange Fruit’, *North*)

The bitter irony is lashed out at the word ‘beatification’ and ‘reverence’. Here Heaney does not play the moralist and a judge. He simply depicts the malady of human psyche and society which subjugate women as mere scapegoat throughout centuries. Brutal murder has been given the title of ‘beatification’ and compulsive submissiveness the name of ‘reverence’. Subtle hint at feminine vulnerability is asserted through such meticulous utterance and measured jargon.

In Heaney we find no marriage but forced sexual union in ‘Act of Union’, and the identity of the dominating male and surrendering female is explicit and determinate. ‘Phallogocentric’ metaphor is employed by him to explore imperial politics where England plays the male and Ireland the subversive second sex. Through this sexual-political revelation Heaney explores the critical state of vulnerable Irish identity. The speaker is a male, metaphor for England who gratifies his sexual desire upon Ireland, metaphor for helpless female victim. The following lines unveil the female vulnerability:

And I am still imperially

Male, leaving you with the pain,

The rending process in the colony,

The battering ram, the boom burst from within.

(Act of Union, *North*)

In this regard Patricia Coughlan makes a penetrating, cutting remark, “Act of Union’ rehearses narratives of rape and sexual violation.”<sup>6</sup>The advancement of the speaker reveals the prerogative of imperial male coercion. Heaney’s persona narrates the whole process of the act of union:

.....I caress

The heaving province where your past has grown.

I am the tall kingdom over your shoulder

That you would neither cajole nor ignore.

Conquest is a lie. I grow older

Conceding your half-independent shore

Within whose borders now my legacy

Culminates inexorably.

(‘Act of Union’, *North*)

The English male colonial persona unhesitatingly speaks of his imperial prerogative where questions on ontological views of right and wrong, justice, reason and rationality have been rendered meaningless. The

speaker is a tyrant, an oppressor, a predator, a rapist, a foreign imperial force who asserts his unchallenged authority. He proclaims:

And I am still imperially  
Male, leaving you with the pain,  
The rending process in the colony,  
(*'The Act of Union', North*)

The views and actions of the society becomes more uglier in one of his greatest poems 'Punishment'. That women are always made sacrificial 'scapegoat', in prehistoric past as well as in the context of the present Irish trouble, is made clear through the presentation of the 'Winderby Girl' whose body was discovered in the bog peat, at least few thousand years old by some Danish farmers in 1950. Heaney gives an account of the charming beauty of the 'flaxen-haired' girl who was brutally killed and made a scapegoat of savage tribal ritual. Heaney's attitude to the girl is that of attraction and repulsion. That he was emotionally and instinctively attached to the predicament of the girl and felt pity and sympathy for her is evident from the statement:

Little adulteress,  
Before they punish you  
  
You were flaxen-haired,  
undernourished, and your  
tar-black face was beautiful.  
My poor scapegoat,

I almost love you  
(*'Punishment', North*)

He even secretly loved her had she not been punished for 'adultery'. Heaney plays the role of a 'voyeur', an escapist, in conformity with his Catholic orthodox prejudice of sexual purity of women. His ambivalence is registered in the next few lines:

I am an artful voyeur  
.....  
I who would have stood dumb  
When your betraying sisters,  
cauled in tar,  
wept by the railing  
  
who would have connive  
in civilized outrage  
yet understand the exact  
and tribal, intimate revenge.

(*'Punishment', North*)

He confesses his playing the role of a 'voyeur' and remaining silent and passive (dumb) when the girl was being punished. Not only this, he passively supports and encourages the heinous act of atrocities on the girl. This he enunciates in the phrase 'connive/ in civilized outrage'. The paradox 'civilized outrage' signifies archetypal primitive psychic perversion and disintegration that lead to violence and atrocity on women in the name of ritual, religion and sexuality. At the same time, Heaney honestly exposes the truth of subconscious phallic allegiances to such act of violence and atrocity. Punishment for adultery should be rendered to both the male and female because the act of sexuality can't happen without active participation of the male also. Here not only the male goes scot-free, the mechanism of patriarchal domination punishes the woman, in the name of adultery. The concluding stanza is of profound self-division of the persona. He states that he connives in the criminal act of violence on the girl which is 'outrageous'. At the same time, he confesses that civilized society of contemporary time also fails to come out of murderous tribal psyche that persists in collective unconscious of race and continues to operate still today in the name of religious rituals. The poem also opens up political dimension of violence. Does the persona sing the song of Irish liberation movement through the punishment of the 'betraying sisters'? Who are these betraying sisters and to whom do they betray? The answer is easy to understand with their weeping 'by the railings' when they are 'cauled in tar'. A few young girls from bordering area supposed to develop sexual relation with foreign soldiers and informed them secret movements and camouflages of the IRA. These girls were brutally punished by the IRA. The historical political perspective of violence is thus embedded in the deep structure of the text. The lines therefore, are fraught with trenchant situational irony and the violence against women become all the more ugly and naked.

Heaney thus upholds the bleak and dark reality of women's precarious state throughout centuries which is the result of male dominated patriarchy. Society never concedes her to live on her own as she wishes and always uses means and ways to control and exploit the fair sex. Moreover, violence and atrocities against women in his poems shows how the society behaves against women in a cruel and barbarous way.

Even in the use of language Heaney shows his dexterity in showing subordinating state of women in every society. This is exemplified in his heavy use of consonant sounds very often over-rides vowel sounds, thus giving his tone a savage masculinity and dominance. In this respect Deane has raised the question of linguistic politics, through the metaphor of sexual distinction. According to him:

"... Even there, there is a sexual differentiation, the vowel being female, the consonant male; and in the sexual differentiation there is a political distinction, the Irish vowel raped by the English consonant. Thus, a species of linguistic politics emerges, with pronunciation, the very movement of the mouth on a word being a kiss of intimacy or an enforcement."<sup>7</sup>

#### **IV. CONCLUSION:**

Seamus Heaney, like other great male poets of past, indulges in observing, presenting, discussing and analyzing the fair sex from the masculine points of view, unconsciously /consciously preserving the phallic ego of male. Though not a misogynist like Eliot, his female figures are mostly drawn either as victims or erotic image of woman meant to mitigate the sexual desire of men. And all the while Heaney remains a voyeur. Neither he raised the voice of protest nor registers his voice to resist atrocities on women.

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