



“The Fleshly School of Poetry” vis-à-vis Victorian Heteropatriarchy: A Queer Ecofeminist Reading of Select Pre-Raphaelite Poetry and Paintings

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Abstract

Women are symbolically and mythologically associated with nature in the Western tradition. Reinforcing the myth, Enlightenment philosophy celebrates human rationality and masculinity over nature and women. In contrast, though ecofeminism believes in this close contiguity of women with nature, it finds human beings, especially white male in the role of the plunderer. Thus, whether in the patriarchal tradition of the West or in the discourse of the ecofeminism, a hierarchical binary relation between human beings and nature, men and women is taken for granted. But moving beyond this duality, there are some ecofeminists like Plumwood who argues to view nature or women not as a relational opposite, but as a distinct unique autonomous entity. Here lies the germ of intersection between ecofeminism and queer theory. Queer ecofeminism not only does away with any kind of hierarchical binary construction of nature or anything ‘natural’ in contrast to everything cultural or rational but also explores nature as feminised, eroticised and queered. The paper seeks to explore how the Pre-Raphaelite poets and painters resist the grand narratives of Enlightenment and Victorian heteronormativity from a queer ecofeminist perspective. These poets and painters not only foreground the real nature in its simplicity and freshness instead of presenting nature as mere background or resource for the furthering on of human culture, but also voice for women’s autonomy and alternative sexuality, resisting the regimes of heteronormativity altogether. Without conforming to the dualistic principle of the erotophobic and homophobic Victorian heteropatriarchy, these poets and painters call for the celebration of nature’s autonomy, women’s vitality and sexual multiplicity.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Queer, Pre-Raphaelite, Heteropatriarchy.

1.1 Introduction

In Western tradition women have been synonymised with nature and this feminine closeness to nature has been a ploy of the heteronormative patriarchy to undermine both nature and women. From the dawn of civilization, women and nature have been thought of as mere resources or background to further the important male activities for the progress of culture and civilization. Cartesian philosophy reinforced the exploitation of nature by human beings after stripping of the mind like quality from nature and positing mind or human consciousness over matter. In the heyday of Enlightenment, ‘reason’ becomes the important marker of distinction between male/female or natural/human. The famous ecofeminist Val Plumwood (1993) observes:

Reason in the western tradition has been constructed as the privileged domain of the master, who has conceived nature as a wife or subordinate other encompassing and

representing the sphere of materiality, subsistence and the feminine which the master has split off and constructed as beneath him. (p. 3)

Thus, nature which has come to represent anything inferior, passive, uncivilized and irrational provides the logic for human appropriation of nature for the furthering of the human civilization and culture. Not only nature but anything natural is backgrounded in contrast to everything rational which is always foregrounded. Hence, the racial other and the sexual other are also subordinated and marginalized as they are thought to be closer to primitive nature, uncivilized, uncultured and do not conform to the rationalist philosophy of Western heteropatriarchal culture. Considering nature in feminine and culture in masculine terms gives birth to the logic of heteronormativity which devalues any other sexuality other than heterosexuality as “unnatural” and “perverted”. This in turn gives birth to a number of hierarchical dualism like human/natural, culture/nature, man/woman, heterosexual/queer etc. For the liberation of nature or anything subordinated as natural, ecofeminism seeks to overthrow this hierarchical binary master model of the Western rationalist philosophy. Instead of considering nature or any marginalized category of the dualistic master model as relational opposite of the rationalist self, one must consider the ‘other’ as an independent, autonomous entity. Plumwood (1993) argues, “Overcoming the dualistic dynamic requires recognition of both continuity and difference; this means acknowledging the other as neither alien to and discontinuous from self nor assimilated to or an extension of self” (p. 6). Here lies the germ of intersection between ecofeminism and queer philosophy which also believes in moving beyond the binary construction of human identity. The queer theorist Judith Butler (1990) contends, “. . . it is an essential subversion in which the binary is both presupposed and proliferated to the point where it no longer makes sense” (p. 173).

In the Western rationalist philosophy, the idea of human is highly normative. An ideal human is a masculine man and it excludes not only the women, but also the racial other, sexual subalterns, lower class and the non-human world. Ecofeminist writer Ellen O’Loughlin (1993) asserts, “We have to examine how racism, heterosexism, classism, ageism, and sexism are all related to naturism” (p. 148). All these forms of oppressions are so inextricably interrelated that love of nature invariably involves subverting any other dominant master-narratives of oppression. Instead of giving primacy to the plundering of nature only, ecofeminists find it wise to do away with the dualistic principle itself. Queer ecofeminist Greta Gaard (1997) postulates, “A queer ecofeminist perspective would argue that the reason/erotic and heterosexual/queer dualisms have now become part of the master identity, and that dismantling these dualisms is integral to the project of ecofeminism” (p. 140). Overthrowing the binary construction of human/nature, man/woman, straight/queer, queer ecofeminism also celebrates the erotic diversity of nature.

The paradox is that while all the oppressed groups of the duality are naturalized, queers are thought to be “against the nature”. Since nature is considered to be a mother figure and associated with procreation, queers are thought to be unnatural as queer sexuality doesn’t lead to procreation. The heteronormative logic of procreation not only becomes a burden for the women to bear the responsibility of procreation, but also is a negation of the myriad forms of sexuality practiced in nature. A close observation of the sexual practices of the non-human species in nature disapproves the equation of the sexuality with procreation. The queer ecofeminist Greta Gaard has already spoken about the diverse sexual practices of the non-human species in her essay “Toward A Queer Ecofeminism” (1997). Hence to accept only one form of sexuality, i.e. the conjugal procreative heterosexuality as “natural” and any other sexual practice as “against the nature” is not only a false argument, but also gives birth to a hegemonic discourse which devalues and precludes sexual diversity in nature as well as in the human world. From a queer ecofeminist perspective then it becomes obvious that to liberate

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women and nature from the shackles of heteronormative patriarchy necessitates giving importance to the nature, the erotic and the queer. Simply put, ecofeminism works to liberate nature and anything marginalized for being “natural”, such as the women and the sexual subalterns, from the grand narratives of heteropatriarchy. According to Greta Gaard (1997), “. . . a democratic, ecological society envisioned as the goal of ecofeminism will, of necessity, be a society that values sexual diversity and the erotic” (p. 138). Pre-Raphaelite poetry as well as painting does this task of foregrounding the nature, the women and the erotic.

2.1 Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

Pre-Raphaelite movement was primarily an artistic movement in revolt against the eighteenth-century academicism, initiated in Victorian England by some painters like Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, William Michael Rossetti who formed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848. Some of these painters also wrote poetry and influenced other poets like William Morris, A. C. Swinburne, Coventry Patmore, C. G. Rossetti and more. Moving beyond the utilitarian, the mundane, didactic and complex art form of the time, these painters and poets took inspiration from medievalism and emphasized on the naturalness, simplicity and realistic detail. In an age which demanded conformity, the Pre-Raphaelites revolted against the dominant Victorian discourses regarding art, gender, sexuality, class etc. Resisting the rationalist philosophy and moral prudence of the Victorian culture which was ripped by the dualistic dichotomies of culture/nature, science/religion, man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, spiritual/sensual, elites/labourers etc., the pre-Raphaelite poets and painters moved beyond the dualistic principle and created a new form of art where all these contraries coalesce together. However, while on the one hand they found critics like John Ruskin as their mentor who enthusiastically voiced their creed, on the other hand there was also critics like Robert Buchanan who vehemently censored the pre-Raphaelite poets as grossly indecent, “sensual” in his 1871 article “The Fleshly School of Poetry.”

Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a male domain and obviously bears a homoerotic dimension. Gay Daly in her famous book *Pre-Raphaelites in Love* (1989) observes, “Intense friendships between young men were common, not least because Victorians were under so much pressure to repress their sexuality . . . Instead, the young men threw themselves into their relationships with one another, forming passionate bonds that lasted, sometimes until death” (p. 18). Painters like W. H. Hunt and J. E. Millais bore close friendship and often fondled together late night helping each other finish their painting. Later, Hunt’s intimacy with his new friend D. G. Rossetti while J. E. Millais was away for sometimes angered the latter. Daly (1989) comments, “He was jealous of Hunt’s tremendous excitement over his new friendship” (p. 15). Legend also has it that the poet A. C. Swinburne and the gay painter Simeon Solomon used to chase each other naked. Members of the group also had strong relation with their female model turned muse. D. G. Rossetti transformed Elizabeth Siddal from a mere model to saintly Beatrice. William Morris’s relations with Jane Burden, William Hunt’s with Annie Miller, J. E. Millais’s with Effie Gray are case in point. Though these relations often culminated to marriage, most of them were unhappy and unfruitful. While most of the paintings induced by the beloved model bear the mark of the idealization of the female beauty, the ladies in real life often felt trapped in the domestic world of patriarchy. But in the world of pre-Raphaelitism women were not any homogenous category and always victimized. There was also a sense of sisterhood which often finds expression in the works of the male as well as female poets and painters. They often voiced a protest against patriarchal eulogization of female beauty and feminine nature.

2.2 Pre-Raphaelite Paintings

After the industrial revolution and consequent scientific progress, men started to consider their existence independent of nature. Pre-Raphaelites brought back the closeness of human beings with nature. In opposition to the capitalist logic of utilitarianism, these poets and painters observed nature closely, focused on the simplicity and sincerity of the natural subject, on the atmosphere over the narrative. While on the one hand, they presented human beings not alien to but part of nature, on the other hand they negated any such belief as “earth-mother” and presented women as complete human beings and as much part of nature or culture as men are. While being true to nature with hyper-realistic detail and bright colour combination, the pre-Raphaelite painters also celebrated the “perverse” eroticism resisting the grand narratives of Victorian heteropatriarchy. Many painters presented men and women in their nakedness embracing each other and enjoying their love in the lap of nature, e.g. Edward Burne Jones’ *Phyllis and Demophoon* (1870) and J. E. Millais’ *Cymon and Iphigenia* (1851).



Figure 1: Cymon and Iphigenia

In most of the paintings men were presented as effeminate whether in J. E. Millais’s *Ferdinand* (1850) or in E. B. Jones’ *Merciful knight* (1863). D. G. Rossetti’s *The Bower Meadow* (1872) E. B. Jones’s *Pygmalion and Galateaseries* (1875 – 1878) and *The Garden of Pan* (1886) also celebrate the queer eroticism in the lap of nature. Most of the paintings featured the striking sensual figures in an ambiguous narrative. D. G. Rossetti while sensualises the sacred in the sensual portrait of the goddess Venus in his painting titled *Astarte Syriaca* (1877), he idolizes the female beauty in the portrait of his wife turned muse Elizabeth Siddal. However, Elizabeth Siddal who herself was a pre-Raphaelite painter poet and worked as a model for her husband D. G. Rossetti and other mail painters, resisted this patriarchal eulogization of the beloved as deity or poetic muse. Her own self portrait differs from the idealized female beauty portrayed by the pre-Raphaelite men.



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Figure 2
Portrait of Siddal by D.G. Rossetti in 1854

Figure 3
Siddle’s Self Portrait in 1854

Siddal also voices her protest against her husband’s betrayal, as in the poem “Love and Hate”: “Ope not thy lips, thou foolish one, / Nor turn to me thy face . . . And turn away thy false dark eyes, / Nor gaze into my face: / Great love I bore thee; now great hate / Sits grimly in its place . . . And thou art like the poisonous tree / That stole my life away. And she finds solace in the midst of nature: “A silent wood, I enter thee / With a heart so full of misery - / and the ferns that cling about me knees. / In thy darkest shadow let me sit / When the grey owls about thee flit: / There I will ask of thee a boon, / That I may not faint or die or swoon” (“A Silent Wood”).

Simeon Solomon, the pre-Raphaelite painter, who was persecuted for homosexual offences in 1873, produced paintings that celebrated homosexual desire in an age of “compulsory heterosexuality”. His famous painting *The Bride, Bridegroom and Sad Love* (1865) exposes the misfortune of the gay men who were compelled to conform to the norms of heterosexuality in Victorian times.



Figure 4: *The Bride, Bridegroom and Sad Love*
The painting shows that though the gay man is unwillingly locked in embrace with the bride, his love inclines to his gay lover in the form of Cupid. Solomon also wrote a prose poem “A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep” on gay love.

2.3 Pre-Raphaelite Poetry

The poems of D. G. Rossetti and of his sister C. G. Rossetti like that of the other pre-Raphaelite poets are almost pictorial. Nature is closely observed and painted with its simplicity and freshness. In his famous poem “The Blessed Damozel” (1850), D. G. Rossetti picturises a scene of heaven with its vivid, sensuous natural beauty. In close cohabitation with flowers and birds the blessed damozel waits in heaven for her lover to come and meet her. The sacredness of such a place is made earthlier with the sensuous and passionate description of the lady whose bosoms make warm the gold bar of heaven: “Until her bosom must have made/The bar she leaned on warm.” Contrary to the patriarchal norm of the time, here the lady expresses her love passionately and wishes to guide her lover to the God and solemnize their love for ever. Love is played out in close contiguity with nature. Rossetti’s “House of Life” (1881) is a sonnet sequence which blurs the distinction not only between man and nature, but also many other dualisms like man/woman, spiritual/sensual etc. In the sonnet titled “Severed Selves”, the poet says “Two separate divided silences,/Which, brought together, would find loving voice; / Two glances which together would rejoice/In love . . .” Without adhering to the sublime/sensual duality, Rossetti’s poems give the natural a spiritual gloss and the divine turned erotic, since the poet finds “desire in deity”: “I was a child beneath her touch, - a man/When breast to breast we clung, even I and she, -/A spirit when her spirit looked through me, -/ A god when all our life-breath met to fan/Our life-blood, till love’s emulous ardours ran,/Fire within fire, desire in deity” (“The Kiss”).

Another poet whose poetry displays a queer ecofeminist perspective is the female poet Christina Georgina Rossetti. C. G. Rossetti, a devout Christian who never married has been called “the female queer virgin” by critics like Frederick S. Roden (2003). She not only questions the Victorian heteronormativity logic of masculine rationality and female passivity but also celebrates queerness in nature and human relation. In “Goblin Market” (1862), she subverts the traditional male/female gender roles. The women in this poem embody the heroic masculine behaviour as well as the feminine frailty and compassion. With obvious reference to the Biblical story of Eve and the fallen woman, the poem shows how Laura falls a prey to the masculine seduction of the goblins who obviously represent men in the poem. But unlike the Biblical story where the role of the redeemer is reserved for Christ, the male figure, here Laura, the Eve figure is redeemed by her sister Lizzie with courage and heroic stoicism standing firm to the physical molestation by the goblins. Critics like Janet Galligani Casey (2016) observe: “At the end of *Goblin Market* Rossetti posits not a world without men, but a world in which all people are allowed to play all parts, to embrace a wholeness that is only possible with the dissolution of the traditional male/female dichotomy” (p. 212).

The discourse of duality is also challenged in her presentation of the erotic and the homosexuality which are equated with the nature in contrast to the culture. Eroticism runs supreme in this poem in a natural setting. The goblins who represent the erotic seduction lure the ladies with sensual trade cry in “tone as smooth as honey.” Laura pays them with the part of her body, the “precious golden lock.” “Sweeter than honey from the rock,/Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,/Clearer than water flowed that juice;. . .She sucked and sucked and sucked the more/Fruits which that unknown orchard bore.” Then she suffers the fate of Jeannie, “Who should have been a bride; / But who for joys brides hope to have / Fell sick and died.” The repeated use of the word “suck” adds to the carnal nature of the negotiation. Lizzie who redeems her sister also has to confront later the physical molestation by the goblins. While traditionally erotic love is associated with the female, the Eve figure and the spiritual love with the male, the Christ figure, Rossetti subverts the Biblical tradition by positing women as both the redeemer and the redeemed.

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The homoeroticism between the two sisters Laura and Lizzie is given a pictorial presentation in the poem. The two sisters sleep as couple in a bed: “Crouching close together / In the cooling weather, / with clasping arms and cautioning lips, / with tingling cheeks and finger tips.” Nature responds to their queer love, as the poet says: “Moon and stars gazed in at them, / Wind sang to them lullaby, / Lumbering owls forbore to fly, / Not a bat flapped to and fro / Round their nest: / Cheek to cheek and breast to breast / Locked together in one nest.” The pathetic fallacy undermines the heteronormative discourse of homosexuality as something “against the law of nature.” Lizzie becomes a lesbian Christ figure the moment she redeems her sister from her impending doom. She cries out: “Did you miss me? / Come and kiss me. / Never mind my bruises, / Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices. And this is how Laura responds “She clung about her sister, / Kissed and kissed and kissed her.” The homoerotic relation of the sisters does not foreclose their heterosexual relation either with the goblin men or with their husbands, since at the end of the poem, one finds both the sisters married to men and having children. Thus, the poet while naturalises homosexuality and incest, she also refuses to admit homosexual identity as contrary to the heterosexual identity.

Like C. G. Rossetti, another pre-Raphaelite poet who poses a threat to the erotophobic and homophobic heteropatriarchy of Victorian era is the gay poet Algernon Charles Swinburne. In his *Poems and Ballads* (1866), the poet not only celebrates the sexual “perversity” but also finds hermaphroditism as the perfect form of identity. In the poem “Fragoletta”, the poet addresses to the androgynous person, “O mysterious flower” and asks “O Love! What shall be said of thee . . . Being sexless, wilt thou be / Maiden or boy?” The poet continues to enjoy intimacy with the hermaphrodite body, “O sole desire of my delight / O sole delight of my desire! / Mine eyelids and eyesight / Feed on thee day and night / Like lips on fire.” Swinburne goes on to celebrate the “unnatural”, “perverse” kind of sexual practices to challenge procreative heterosexuality as the norm. In another of his poem “Hermaphroditus”, the poet explores what his culture considers perverse, since he conceived the identity of perfect human being in the combination of male and female. Lesbianism finds its eloquent expression in the poem “Sapphics”. Though the poems dealt with taboo subjects like lesbianism, sado-masochism, and anti-theism, first collection of the poems, published in 1866, became instantly popular, thus puncturing the repressive ethos of Victorian heteronormativity. Through the exploration of the perverse and the androgynous concept of identity, Swinburne not only moved beyond the Victorian notion of dual identity regarding gender and sexuality but also eroticised the nature.

The vision of a democratic, ecological society can be traced in the world of pre-Raphaelitism, since the celebration of nature parallels the recognition of the women, the erotic and the queer. Resisting the binary construction of culture/nature, man/woman, straight/queer, these poets and painters viewed nature and anything “natural” as autonomous complete whole. Though pre-Raphaelitism was primarily an artistic revolt against the utilitarian and academic tradition in painting, these poets and painters actually ended up putting a tough resistance against the grand narratives of Victorian heteropatriarchy whose superstructure was built on the base of the hierarchical dualism. Nullifying the regimes of hierarchical master dualities of Victorian heteropatriarchy itself, the pre -Raphaelite poets and painters helped liberate nature, women and queer from the straightjacket of the Victorian morality and rationalist philosophy. Their attempt to create a democratic ecological society helped sharpen the vision of queer ecofeminism.

Note:

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Bio-note

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