

A Critical Reading of the Poems of Preetinicha Barman through the Lens of Ecofeminism

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Abstract: *The objective of this paper is to symbolically analyze and evaluate the selected poems of Preetinicha Barman, a Shillong-based multi-lingual poet. In poetry and other forms of writing, symbolism is often used to convey a specific meaning to the audience. Writers often employ this literary device as a means of artistic expression. Preetinicha Barman is no exception. In her poems she uses various images and symbols in order for the readers to behold and analyze her poems from different perspectives pertaining but not limited to ecofeminism. Her images and symbols are mostly drawn from the familiar, commonplace and natural world, and they poetically reveal how in love as in life, a woman has to remain passive and dwindle into a secondary role as is conspicuously shown in the poem “The Transformed River”. In other two of her poems namely “A Dream Of Youth” and “Play, Love”, however, women’s desire and self-estimation may be looked at as the most volatile objects that occupy the prime space. Echoing Kamala Das, Preetinicha Barman in her poems brings to light a wide panorama of themes: unfulfilled love, lusts, and sexual bouts, agony and anguish, pain and sufferings, and psychological trauma that a woman goes through in a patriarchal society. A close reading of her poems, however, would lead an alert reader to understand these as an attempt made to examine man-woman relationship quite systematically, even if a bit ruthlessly, and her characteristic imagery and symbolism play a vital role in this conveyance.*

Keywords: *Preetinicha Barman, Symbolism, Ecofeminism, Unfulfilled Love, Psychological Trauma.*

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Let them come and see men and women and children who know how to live, whose joy of life has not yet been killed by those who claimed to teach other nations how to live.

— Chinua Achebe

Preetinicha Barman's poetry is memorable not only for her bold handling of the theme, but also for its suggestive and functional imagery and symbolism. Her images and symbols are mostly drawn from the familiar, commonplace and natural world, and they poetically reveal how in love as in life, a woman has to remain passive and dwindle into a secondary role as is evidenced by the poem "*The Transformed River*". In other two of her poems namely "*A Dream Of Youth*" and "*Play, Love*", however, women's desire and self-estimation may be looked at as the most volatile objects that occupy the prime space. Echoing Kamala Das, Preetinicha Barman in her poems brings to light a wide panorama of themes: unfulfilled love, lusts, and sexual bouts, agony and anguish, pain and sufferings, and psychological trauma that a woman goes through in a patriarchal society, and her characteristic imagery and symbolism play a vital role in this conveyance. This paper will mainly focus on the three selected poems of Preetinicha Barman, "*A Dream of Youth*", "*The Transformed River*" and "*Play, Love*", which offer a rich banquet of imagery to the readers.

Unlike poems written throughout history, which have served as a way for individuals to find comfort and validation in politically strenuous times, Barman's poems explore and question the violence committed against nature, animals, and even women. Steering to history there were poets like Charlotte Mew and Aemilia Lanyer who lived and wrote in a time when women had very few rights at all, let alone the right to an opinion. As history moves, it brings along with it the poems of Forough Farrokhzad, Linda Hogan, Marge Piercy and Maya Angelou, who all embraced the ecofeminist ideal that though women have been socially chained to their biological functions through their association with nature, recognizing and articulating the parallel of violence against women and nature can lead to power over patriarchal forces and a reversal of power structures. Additionally, the way that ecofeminist themes are utilized in poetry throughout history shows a significant pattern of progression-while in early poetry, nature is depicted as a place for escape from patriarchal forces into feminine community, in later poetry as in Barman's the bond that women share with nature is empowering. Instead of hiding, the speakers of these poems resist. In a contemporary context, these poems can become a source of power and healing for feminist activists who may be feeling hopeless in the midst of a seemingly never ending fight.

Feminist thinking has constantly questioned history, particularly ancient history, with the aim of understanding the origins and causes of the asymmetry between the genders and of sexual division in every walk of life. Examining the historical process from the viewpoint of the oppressed, allowing them a place in history, hearing their voices, reconstructing their fight for emancipation, is essential for anyone whose perspective is focused upon change. Availing themselves of the very numerous studies on the origins of patriarchy carried out since the 19th century, women historians have wished to go back to the original violence, have deeply examined the connection between dominion over women and the exploitation of nature, between the exploitation of women and the unlimited accumulation and growth paradigm, revealing the network of injustice and oppression wherein patriarchy and capitalism are firmly united.

Reproducing and protecting human life in collaboration and harmony with nature is what women have been doing since time immemorial, an unacknowledged task, naturalised, made invisible, slavish and servile. Recovering the values wherein women have always recognised themselves and initiating a process of economic and cultural change means, primarily, deconstructing the system of thought that has justified and justifies the oppression of women and the exploitation of animals and nature. Stemming from this perspective is the term “*ecofeminism*”, a branch of feminism first appeared in 1974, in a piece of writing by Françoise d’Eaubonne, *Le féminisme ou la mort* (Feminism or Death), in which the French feminist examined the environmental costs of ‘*development*’ and identified women as the subjects of the change. In 1978, she founded the *Écologie et Féminisme* movement which, although it made little impact in France, attracted considerable interest in Australia and the USA. 1974 also saw the appearance of a brief article by the American anthropologist Sherry Ortner, which was to become a key point of reference in ecofeminist thought. In *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?* Ortner, taking her lead from the universality of women’s subordination in all cultures, suggested a deep investigation into the origins of violence and, in order to trace the history, proposed a return to the differences inscribed on the body. Men, who lack any natural creative functions, must (or have the chance to) assert their own creativity artificially, by way of techniques. “*In so doing, they create objects that are relatively long-lasting, eternal, transcendent, in contrast to women, who simply create human beings, ephemeral mortal creatures*”.³ This would explain, in the author’s view, why activities aimed at suppressing life (weapons were the first artefacts) have always enjoyed great prestige, while feminine ones aimed at creating and preserving life have been belittled.

While as Adriana Cavarero writes, modernity has invented the category of perfect individualism, independent and master of itself, ecofeminism, in contrast,

emphasizes the interconnection between all forms of life, offers an ethical theory based not actually on separation or abstract individualism, but on the values of inclusion, relationships, prioritizing the conservation of life and of motherhood, beginning with the awareness of each one's vulnerability.⁴ The recurring image in ecofeminist literature is that of weaving and spinning and the ethic it inspires has been defined as a "quilt in the making", "a process similar to patchwork, comprised of cuttings provided by people who live under different socio-economic, cultural and historical conditions. The picture that emerges will depend on the life-experience, the ethical issues and the specific socio-economic and historical contexts of those taking part".⁵⁺²

The ecofeminist ethic is based above all on empathy, on the ability to hear and listen. It stems from bodily experiences linked to motherhood, and perceives the body as a source of knowledge, not actually as merely biological. It is impossible, in fact, to separate women's ability to create life from women and their bodies, the same bodies that have been robbed of their cultural, human and spiritual dimension and that are manipulated, tortured and commodified. Acknowledging that bodily experience posits women, as regards nature, differently from men, the various women authors have highlighted a different way of knowing, learning and feeling. Feeling the interrelations with living beings and nature demands intense attention towards the reality of the other, and demands power of concentration and of judgement, the ability to grasp the experience of others. The ecofeminist ethic is an emotional and intellectual practice, an ethic of compassion that includes all living beings.¹

In outlining the shift from a society dominated by the symbolic order of death towards one directed towards life, from a way of thinking that is linear and fragmentary, abstract, and dominated by opposition against a way of thinking that is respectful to subjectivity and individuality, from a politics based on universalistic categories to one that has to do with plurality and difference, ecofeminists have particularly stressed the symbolic nature of motherhood, that is, on what it represents: giving, caring, embracing the other as unique and unrepeatable. Thereby, the whole Western tradition has been brought into question. In fact, as Adriana Cavarero writes,

"Philosophy's primary task lies in ignoring birth, and thus ignoring the locus of the Appearance of the uniqueness and the oneness embodied, where the reality of the new baby and its relationship are intrinsic [...]. So he or she who is born constitutes a relational subjectivity, and prevents the theorisation of a uniqueness that is individualism".

In *"The Transformed River"* Barman uses subtle images and symbols to convey how a woman's life is vulnerable both physically and emotionally to the patriarchal society she lives in. The poem begins with the transformation of a "river", symbolising fertility, birth, flow of life, most specifically a young girl, into a "woman" and projects in

details the challenges she faces after being married to a man who is representative of a patriarchal figure. The image of the “rainbow” here is symbolic of the various emotions of the lover that the girl is unconsciously entrapped by and in return sacrifices all her love, her ambitions and her body in his hands believing it to be a purely platonic love and the man to be an ideal lover. But “*he is every man/Who wants a woman, just as I am every/Woman who seeks love.In him...the hungry haste / Of rivers, in me...the oceans’ tireless / Waiting*”, as Kamala Das’s poem “*An Introduction*” reads. Her trust is utterly broken down- “*She became the dictator of a lonely island*”. The “*island*” here refers to her husband’s house where she has come to live as a wife but is treated as a housekeeper.

The poem also symbolically describes some erotic scenes in the lines such as, “*Smooching your sword*”, “*the tale of your enchanting fingers*” which simply imply the physical act of lovemaking. The girl’s craving for emotional love is misinterpreted by her husband as physical desire and she is subjected to marital rape. The cruel and unjust treatment inflicted on the speaker here bears a resemblance to Kamala Das’s poem “*An introduction*” as the speaker of this poem also goes through similar oppression, she points out- “*When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask / For, he drew a youth of sixteen, into the / Bedroom and closed the door, He did not beat me / But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.*” The line “*she is splintered into a host of spirits*” suggests that she is now a mother but her husband treats her less than a servant in the house after the jouissance is derived from her. She is relegated to the job of a “*guard*”, and therefore, has to patrol and monitor the house all day and all night to protect it. For this case, her womanhood is admired but her love and desires are not respected and fulfilled. She is a “*woman*” and she also has the freedom to do what she wants. She has emotions too. But she is prohibited from enjoying her life freely by her authoritarian husband who “*barred (her) all whispers, / all talks to the rustic satyrs*” just like how the speaker in “*An Introduction*” is kept under control by the “*categorizers*”- “*Don’t sit / On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.*” Her role as a woman is supposed to be meek, quiet and controlled. She is strictly restricted only to look after her children, serve the house, cook for the family, take care of her dominating husband and in doing so she seems to take the incarnation of different spirits like “*dashabhujā*” in order to manage all these duties. But unlike goddess Durga who is said to have killed the demon king Mahishasura and prevailed good over the evils in the world, her life energy and pace is slowed down by her evil husband. In this poem, Barman vividly projects the pathetic journey of a woman from girlhood to motherhood and manifold domestic restrictions and social prohibitions she falls victim to in this excruciating process through the use of various symbols.

As Wordsworth notes in his “*Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections*

of *Early Childhood*”: “Heaven lies about us in our infancy!”, Preetinicha Barman in her poem “A Dream of Youth” expresses a longing for the heavenly state of youth by her use of symbolism.⁶ Upon an initial reading of the poem, it seems to be a dream into a dream. The poem takes the reader on a voyage to “a dream of youth”—a phase of life that is pleasant, lovely, full of innocence, vigour, freshness, immaturity with an idyllic setting but now exists only in dreams, intoxications or imaginations of the speaker. The speaker with her lover appears to be a pair of birds in her reverie, sharing a feeling of expectation and desire—

*“When we meet, we’ll fly together
caressing each other
with our enthralling beak,
Twitter, twitter, twitter...”*

The speaker’s dissatisfaction with the present harsh reality and preoccupation with the abstract territory she has fabricated together with her lover in her dream that is atemporal, ahistoric, is symbolised by the lines: “We’ll territorialize the sky, / Colonise her spheres.”. The “sky” here refers to the space that the lovers had invented in dream which is wide, open, thereby symbolising freedom. The image of “rainbow” symbolises the various emotions the two lovers have concerning their newfound existence. They feel they are no more trapped in the earthly cage as birds. They are free in their self-made imaginary planet. Once they are done with their “adventure” in the dream vision, they will come back to “nestle in the unfamiliar nest of opportunity”. Here, the “unfamiliar nest” symbolises their relatively matured and quotidian lifestyle on earth.

After the speaker’s dreamy journey to the youthful state, she has become rejuvenated and re-energised to overcome and conquer all the formidable hurdles that might come in the course of their life on earth. The adventure seems to have boosted her up to be prepared for any situation and fight back those hardships in life effectively. Back to reality, she reminisces her past adventure and laughs at the “half-solved mysteries” she has encountered along with her lover in that paradisiacal abode depicted as being above the sky.

The poem becomes clear in the last stanza as the reader comes to know that the speaker’s intoxication is actually caused by “wine”, which is used as a metaphor, quite similar to the heavenly nectar that one plunges into while being in an ethereal mood, rather than the real wine. Here, the wine serves as a symbol of escape from reality, and it also helps the speaker forget all earthly sufferings for a while, and makes her rendezvous with her ostensibly identified lover possible at least in dream. The speaker says, “We’ll meet and melt into wine.” Not content or happy with her physical existence full of hubbubs, the speaker wishes to “Plunge into deep tranquility”. The speaker wants

to be lost in the labyrinth of “*illusions*” as she believes that illusions can only make her union with her lover “*anew*”. She retains her hope of celebrating youthfulness with her lover forever—

*“You and I would be young again
to nourish youth inside our feathers.”*

In “*Play, Love*”, Barman maintains a confessional tone akin to Kamala Das’s poems such as “*The Looking Glass*”. The poem talks about the sinister mind of the poetic persona who equates physical love to the game of love. While her lover / husband enjoys the pleasure of union and devotes his mind to it as if engaged in meditation, the beloved remains skeptic. The words “*chant*” and “*hymn*” are symbolic of the moaning sound the speaker’s husband makes each night on the path of attaining the “*Moksha stage of erotica*”, symbolising the orgasmic act of lovemaking. The lines “*For my sceptic mind / It’s an assurance of fidelity*” refer to the disturbed mind of the beloved who demands the proof of fidelity from her lover each time they make love.

The speaker says that the “*cat*” in her turns to a “*bat*” each night which symbolizes the sinister mind turning into a skeptical one which sees everything from a reverse direction. The cat symbolizes fear, secretiveness and curiosity while the nocturnal bats are associated with darkness, fear, death and ill omen. The speaker has to bear witness to her self-transformation each night as her morbid psyche ventures into a dark circuit invented by her melancholic imagination. The speaker drools “*venom of suspicion and envy*” which implies how insipid and loveless her relationship is and how sweetness is snatched off from her life. Then the speaker says the bat in her again turns to cat which indicates that after going through a skeptical journey she reverts to her former uncanny self and drools out venoms of hostility. The “*scars*”, “*red-black patches*” in the body of the speaker are the marks of despair and doubt embossed on her ailing psyche. She licks those away considering them as the dead memories full of ruins and injuries of a “*fragmented dream*”.

To conclude, by means of various images and symbols Preetinicha Barman explores ecological feminism or simply ecofeminism in her poems, thereby drawing a parallel between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature both by patriarchal or male-centred society. At the same time she probes into different stages of human psyche that remain eternally elusive as human mind can never be analysed under any set theorem.

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