



'I WILL MAKE A LADY OF MY OWN'-A NOTE ON THE GENDER-POLITICS IN WORDSWORTH'S *THREE YEARS SHE GREW IN SUN AND SHOWER*

Dr. SUTANU KUMAR MAHAPATRA

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Ramnagar College, Purba Medinipur, West Bengal



**Dr. SUTANU KUMAR
MAHAPATRA**

Article Info:

Article Received: 19/11/2013

Revised on: 27/11/2013

Accepted on: 01/12/2013

ABSTRACT

The paper likes to present a study of gender politics in William Wordsworth's *Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower*. It argues that the picture of nature that is presented in the poem stands closer to the Burkean notion of nature rather than that of the Rousseauist version as is generally believed. However the main contention of the paper is to show that although the poem is a representation of the education of Lucy by nature, such an education relegates Lucy to the typical 18th century ideology of education which trains the female body so as to make her fit for a feminine subjectivity that is characterized by such gender-norms as docility and passivity. This subjectivity is invented and proliferated by the 18th century patriarchal discourses to subjugate women. Thus Lucy, a child, through her proposed education, is intended to get involved in a power-game where the patriarchal gaze symbolized through nature and the poet himself proposes to situate her in a position where her body will be the object of patriarchal domination and competition. Such a presentation reveals how Wordsworth has interiorized in himself the normative of the 18th century gender-ideals.

Key-words: Wordsworth, Nature, Gender, Rousseau, Burke.

Writing about the formation of sexual subjectivity in the modern world, Michel Foucault, in his seminal work, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume-I, has referred to an intriguing process by which the gender-determination of the infantile body has been carried out since the late eighteenth century.

[The] body of the child, under surveillance, surrounded in his cradle, his bed, or his room by an entire watch-crew of parents, nurses, servants, educators, and doctors, all attentive to the least manifestation of his sex, has constituted, particularly since the eighteenth century, another 'local center' of power-knowledge. (98)

Foucault's observation in this excerpt marks out the process of the determination of infantile sex as well as the regulators of this process who comprise "a

grouping made up of the father, the mother, the educator, and the doctor" (99). What is interesting in this whole affair of gender-determination of the child is the process or mode of operation that, as per Foucault's observation, functions through a mechanism of 'surveillance'. The body is always under the close observation and monitoring of those regulators who function as apparatus of power. This mechanism of surveillance is typical of a 'panopticon', a self-regulating infrastructure whose idea Foucault has derived from the nineteenth century British social thinker Jeremy Bentham to symbolize in his another path-breaking volume *Discipline and Punish* the modern mode of disciplining the human body through surveillance (195-228).

Now these regulators as well as this 'panopticon' mode of surveillance exerted a greater influence in the infant's life when his body, after its gender-detection, is subjected to a course of socialization. This socialization involves the disciplining of the body through a process of education and training which rather insidiously endeavours to implant on the body such socially sanctioned norms of sexuality that make him fit for a normative gender role. Now referring to the norms of gender prevailed in the late eighteenth century, Brigitte Glaser has noticed a strong prejudice in society in allotting different norms to different genders. According to her, a large number of diverse eighteenth century discourses of gender produced by members of both sexes generated a very powerful ideology in which "young boys and later men were stereotypically associated with (god-given) reason, activity and aggression, while growing girls were characterized as being emotional and passive, and ideally defensive, modest and delicate" (193). In a wonderful study, Vivien Jones has demonstrated how these discourses of gender stereotypes informed most of the eighteenth century conduct books meant for female education.¹ However, such a projection relegated women decidedly to an inferior position vis-à-vis the male. Or putting it in a different way, such prejudices might have been invented, propagated and implanted to bind the feminine to the stake of inferiority and patriarchal domination. Indeed as the eighteenth century society was found to have subjected women to the limited options of marriage and procreation (Jones 99), the goal and justification of their education and gender-orientation would invariably lie in the production of a docile and passive feminine which could meet the expectation of the strongly biased patriarchy. In order to procure the docile female body, the patriarchal set-up did rely therefore on an educational system that advocated and affected a separate type of education and training for the female and thereby successfully implanted the myth of female inferiority on the female body and mind. However, such a script of gender and gender-education, dominating though it was in the eighteenth century, was never allowed to remain unchallenged. In fact, alternative discourses were also raising their heads raking up heated

debate about the norms of female sexuality and female education². They underscored the fault lines of these normative discourses and fought for the consideration of the rights and education of the female on an equal term. A large number of social thinkers and emerging feminists in the Enlightenment like Locke, Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, Bentham etc. were found to have debated over the form, legitimacy and goal of the rights and proper education of the female. However this debate seemed to have reached its highest pitch in the classic ideological duel between Rousseau and Wollstonecraft. Even though Locke has maintained an ambiguous position in respect of the issue of equality of woman vis-à-vis man (Hirschman and McClure 2-4), he has appeared to be liberal in maintaining that education needs to be fundamentally the same for both the sexes (*Some Thoughts Concerning Education* 12; and "Letter to Mrs. Clarke" 344). According to Martin Simons, Locke likes to see woman being taught to be rational and virtuous (139). The only difference in this course of education for the boys and girls that Locke has allowed is that, beside education, an extra bit of attention is to be given to the maintenance of girls' physical beauty because Locke holds female beauty more important than that of the male ("Letter" 344). This emphasis on female beauty however keeps Locke closer to the dominant patriarchal design which consigns girls to what Wollstonecraft later considers as a subservient "education for the body" (150). Jeremy Bentham too holds that "there are natural differences between the sexes, but not that these are grounds for justifying the oppression of the weaker" (qtd. in Boralevi 8). Women are held unequal to men because of "a moral social cause" and not because of "a natural cause". It is the society, as Bentham holds, which defines her biases. Thus "Her moral biases are ... remarkably different: chastity, modesty, and delicacy, for instance, are prized more than courage in a woman" (qtd. in Boralevi 8). Thus "From their earliest infancy, and even before they are capable of understanding the object of it, one of the most important branches of their education is, to instil into them principles of modesty and reserve" (Boralevi 8). According to Boralevi, Bentham believes that "Only through a good education can women develop all their

potentialities and thus dispense with the male mediators which children and the insane require in their relations with society" (14-15).

Rousseau's attitude to the question of education and subjectivity of the female suffers from puzzling self-contradiction. A prophet for the French Revolution and an ideological inspiration behind the slogan of 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity', Rousseau was undoubtedly an advocate of the freedom of man. But this *man* is not the de-gendered, general human being, bracketing both the male and the female within its periphery. By *man*, he rather means the masculine exclusively. Thus his concern for the emancipation of man denotes the liberation of the masculine only. As a corollary, therefore, such a concern seems to exclude the female from the agenda of liberation. This is nowhere more prominent than in his novel *Émile* where he emphasizes the difference between the male and the female and gives the female separate and special roles. According to him,

In what they have in common, they are equal. Where they differ, they are not comparable. A perfect woman and a perfect man ought not to resemble each other in mind any more than in looks, and perfection is not susceptible of more or less. In the union of the sexes each contributes equally to the common aim, but not in the same way. From this diversity arises the first assignable difference in the moral relations of the two sexes. (358)

For Rousseau, women are best suited to domestic and maternal roles and within this set-up, they are "made specially to please man". Therefore, they should be "passive and weak", and "put up little resistance". His conception of female-education therefore means an implantation of those values in women that can render them fit for an essentially patriarchal world (365).

Such a position of Rousseau in respect of female-education never satisfied Mary Wollstonecraft, the fiery progenitor of the modern feminists who found in Rousseau's picture of woman an intriguing strategy to consign women to the ghetto of patriarchal hegemony. In her masterpiece *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she vehemently criticized the docility, hollow

sensibility and excessive indulgence to the qualities like beauty and grace in women (Richardson 28-29). She rather liked to see women independent, rational and empowered like men. She therefore rejected the patriarchal notion of femininity and advocated for the acculturation of the "eighteenth-century ideal of masculinity" (Glover and Kaplan 49). Now such an ideal could be achievable if a proper education, especially education at the childhood stage, were meted out to the female, even though, as she believed, education was not alone capable of achieving that ideal for the female as there were other "dominant social manners and institutions" (Richardson 24) to influence the formation of female subjectivity. Now because she thrived on the ideal of masculinity for the growth of an emancipated female subjectivity, she came closer to Locke in maintaining that the mode of education for both the sexes should be equal. Thus she retorted at the Rousseauist model of female education, "'Educate women like men,' says Rousseau, 'and the more they resemble our sex the less power will they have over us.' This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves" (*Vindication*_62). To her, therefore, proper education for women meant the conditioning of the female consciousness with the qualities like independence, self-reliance and rational thinking.

Now these are all already well-discussed topics hardly requiring any elaborate treatment here. But what seems to be interesting to us is how an apparently innocent and rather naïve text like William Wordsworth's *Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower*, appearing out of this ideological set-up, treats the question of gender, especially the construction of female sexuality and thereby gets involved in an intriguing relationship with this ideological context. The contention of the present paper is therefore is to present a study that likes to argue that, at the heart of this poem, lies a script in which the patriarchal power, under the missionary zeal of effecting welfare to its female counterpart, adorns the female body with a set of attributes that may apparently look liberal, but in the end, positions the female within the stereotypical norms of sexuality and thereby ensures her subjugation. The essay likes to map out this route of gender-

formation in the poem and shows how this apparently liberal and innocuous mode of gender-formation involves some political connotation by allowing the prevailing norms of sexual politics and domination to control the gender-discourse.

II

*Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower*³ is one of Wordsworth's five famous Lucy-poems composed in and around 1798-99 while the poet was at Goslar in Germany. The poem speaks about the education of Lucy by nature. The poem is supposed to be a close reflection of the idea of nature and education of a child propounded by Rousseau in his general philosophy and particularly in his novel *Emile*⁴. This critical notion seems to presume that Wordsworth was under the influence of Rousseau when this poem was composed. But in his path-breaking analysis of the Burkean influence on the intellectual career of Wordsworth, James K. Chandler has convincingly proved that even though Rousseau had cast a powerful influence on Wordsworth during his radical days, and that, like Rousseau, Wordsworth flung diatribes vigorously against the anti-Rousseauists, especially Burke, during the early 1790's, Wordsworth seemed to manifest a departure from Rousseau in his most formative period in the later part of 1790's and was gradually coming to accept the Burkean logic of nature(116-117).

Now the two ideas of nature, of Rousseau's and Burke's, seem to present a case of classic debate in itself. According to Chandler, Rousseau, in his attempt to define freedom of man, has distinguished between civil life and natural life. Freedom of man, Rousseau seems to believe, lies in natural life, in utter nakedness, free of the habits of civil life that inhibit his freedom. Now what Burke finds objectionable in this thought of Rousseau is that "Rousseau represents the states of nature and civil society as two...absolutes" (Chandler 70). According to Chandler, "Rousseau's distinctions between habit and nature—or acquired and natural abilities, or the prejudices of civil life and things as they are—all represent opposing extremes that brook no compromise"(70). Burke's doctrine of nature never corresponds to any of these extremes. His idea in this regard gravitates towards a "middle", the notion of what Chandler calls "second nature"

which is actually a stage that emerges in the life of a man through a process of evolution from the "physical" to the "moral" (71). Burke seems to suggest that man's true happiness lies in his clothing of his natural self by the values of laws, prejudices and customs.

The picture of nature as presented in *Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower* may substantially be presented as Burkean, not because the poem was written at a time when Wordsworth was coming to accept the Burkean logic leaving or rejecting that of Rousseau, but because the text of the poem itself substantiates this quite clearly. The poem, in the way of defining nature, refers to nature in the Burkean term. Nature seems to be defining its position to Lucy – "Myself will to my darling be/ Both law and impulse" (ll. 7-8). Nature seems to suggest that it is not just "law", meaning, custom and prejudice, nor is it only "impulse" or what Rousseau would have called the passion of the heart in its nakedness. The concept of nature being both law and impulse therefore indicates a rejection of Rousseau and a vindication of the Burkean postulation of moral nature. The antithetical function of this nature – "to kindle or to restrain"(l. 12) is once again reiterating the coexistence of a dialectics within the form of nature that seems to synthesize these antithetical pulls only to a resolution which echoes the Burkean format of moral nature. The interesting fact here is that although Chandler has used Wordsworth's *Prelude* as his focal point in settling the Burkean footprints in the Wordsworthian poetical and philosophical canon, a very short and comparatively less important poem like *Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower* can also be a handy instrument to decode the signature of Burkean notion of nature in Wordsworth's ideology.

Now if the conception of nature in *Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower* be one problematic, the other problematic in the poem is how this nature operates and with what kind of lesson it proposes to embroider the body of the child Lucy. Lucy is going to have lessons, the poem shows, under the close monitoring of "an overseeing power" (l. 11). This "overseeing power" refers, no doubt, to nature and this very function of "overseeing" entails the suggestion of *an eye* that

seems to be monitoring the course of Lucy's subjectification from above. Such suggestion germinates an assumption that this overseeing power emulates the power of the Benthamite 'panopticon' that Foucault suggests in his *Discipline and Punish* as a metaphor for the mode of regulation of the body in the modern world. Moreover, this eye, most possibly, is the eye of a male gazer⁵. Thus the "overseeing power" in the poem is most likely the power of the patriarchal eye that monitors the subjectification of Lucy's body with the norms of gender.

Now a girl of three years, Lucy stands in what Allen Bewell believes as a "prehuman and prelinguistic" stage (202), like the Lockean *tabula rasa* or like the Lacanian preverbal mind, an uncouth slate to be scribbled over. What her unstained mind will be loaded with is suggested by the declaration of nature in the poem – "I will make/ A lady of my own" (ll. 5-6). This declaration suggests that nature will dictate the terms of her making. In another way, this means that Lucy will be denied from choosing a gender-identity for herself⁶. She will be made to fit herself into the position nature casts for her. The word "make" in the lines quoted above comes upon her like a sword that severs her from her self. Her liberation is at once constrained. The patriarchal power is going to situate her in a gender role that satisfies it. Moreover this process is necessary for the patriarchal power because as the poem hints, the patriarchal power likes to possess her – "She shall be mine" (l. 5). This assertion of possession indicates that the question of self-regulation and agency that Wollstonecraft seems to be demanding for women is never allowed to Lucy in this poem.

She is then proposed to be bestowed with the attributes like "Grace" (l. 23), "beauty" (l. 29), "the silence and the calm/ Of mute insensate things" (ll. 17-18). "[H]ers shall be the breathing balm" (l. 16)—claims nature. These attributes of passivity, delicacy and reserve will cast her into the typical late eighteenth century docile feminine-role which, as we have noted in detail earlier in this essay, was upheld as well as challenged and subverted by the Enlightenment thinkers.

Lucy's body, as it gets dressed by the patriarchy-approved gender signs, will become a space for competition. Nature likes to construct her

as an ideal woman and take her permanently within his control. Her death and her being a part of nature's "diurnal course" (*A slumber did my spirit seal*, l. 7) are the symptoms of the absolute domination of Lucy's body by nature. Such a course of incidents however does not appear to be satisfactory for the poet because he too loves her. It may be conjectured that the poet-lover may be contemplating her proposed orientation to the gender-norms with great expectation because he is supposed to be under this assumption that after the decoration of Lucy's body with the marks of ideal gender-norms, nature would allow him to possess her. This desire to possess Lucy may be traced in the trajectory of Lucy's proposed gender subjectivity turning from the abstract and idealistic yardsticks of the feminine to the bare physicality and sensuality of the feminine embodied through a rather uncharacteristic representation of the swelling of Lucy's "virgin bosom" (l. 33). This sensualization of Lucy's body hints at the sensual desire of the male lover itself. The finishing touch at the idol of Lucy makes her a lucrative female body-a body that is useful for meeting the masculine sensual appetite. But it is nature that finally proves to a better rival of the poet in assimilating and appropriating her body within his own world. The competition leaves the poet completely wretched and wrecked with this grave exclamation, "But she is in her grave, and, oh, / The difference to me" (*She dwelt among the untrodden ways*, ll. 11-12).

Judith Page has noticed in the programme of Lucy's education a ritual of "passive surrender" (26). But surrender is a term that reveals only the helplessness of Lucy. It never indicates the other side of the coin- the extent and range of nature's (or patriarchal) power. Thus it may better be described as a story of actually an adoption, an appropriation and even a coercion of the feminine body that seems to have taken place in a narrative that cloaks this cruel fact under the guise of romantic idealism. The following lines of the poem as well as the emphases thereon

This Child I to myself will take;
She shall be mine, and I will make

A lady of my own (Italics mine)
indicate the fact that not only Lucy's body has been divested of any possibility of agency, but nature has

also been accorded absolutely sovereign power to control her body. Michel Foucault, in one of his interviews, has observed a curious combination of "Rousseau's lyricism and Bentham's obsession" ("The Eye of Power" 152) at the heart of the eighteenth century revolutionary society that was preparing itself for its Revolution leading to the realization of the slogan for a transparent society. The intersection of Bentham's panopticon, obviously a metaphor for power and Rousseau's ideas, a form of knowledge, has appeared to Foucault as a phenomenon of that late eighteenth century axis of power-knowledge that is responsible for the emergence of the revolutionary subjectivity. Lucy's body does indeed duplicate this grafting of Benthamite panopticon and Rousseauist knowledge, thus exhibiting what Foucault describes, as a "local center' of power-knowledge". But such a grafting leads Lucy not to that Rousseauist "transparent society". Rousseau has reserved it exclusively for the male. Lucy's predicament lies in her being made only "the silenced object of male desire" (Page 25).

NOTES

¹ For further reading, see O'Malley and Richardson.

² According to Jones, "Education was the issue on which feminists began to challenge assumptions about women's natural inferiority, offering telling critiques of the conduct-book construction of femininity" (98).

³ Citations to this poem as well as other poems of Wordsworth in this essay are taken from Wordsworth: *Poetical Works with Introductions and Notes*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (1973)

⁴"The theme of three years appears to be the moulding of a human being by the forces of nature, a theme that was familiar to Wordsworth and his readers both from the educational thought of Rousseau, and also from the fourth *Eclogue* of Virgil, where a child who is to inaugurate the golden age is showered from its early years with the best gifts of nature" (Durrant 157).

⁵ The widespread perception about nature's gender is that nature is feminine. Among the subscribers to this view mention may be made of Page (26), Mellor (18) and Alexander (25). But Mahoney has a different view. In *William Wordsworth: A Poetic Life*, he observes, "Nature is a

benevolent, if somewhat dominant, personification, almost an image of the Creator. No distant, remote Deity here; rather, a loving Lord who spies his creation after three years of sun and shower had breathed a special kind of loveliness on her. He---nature is clearly masculine will take her to himself" (107). The present essayist too agrees to Mahoney's view with this observation that the way nature has been accorded sovereignty, power of subjectification and control over an otherwise mute Lucy in this particular poem seems to indicate that nature is equated with the patriarchal authority-the male power of the eighteenth century.

⁶ Mellor argues that Lucy and other female figures in Wordsworth's earlier poems "do not exist as independent self-conscious human beings with minds as capable as the poet's". They are "rarely allowed to speak for themselves" (106).

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, Meena. *Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth, and Mary Shelley*. Maryland: Barnes & Noble, 1989.
- Bewell, Alan. *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment: Nature, Man and Society in the Experimental Poetry*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989.
- Campos Boralevi, Lea. *Bentham and the Oppressed*. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1984.
- Chandler, James K. *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Durrant, Geoffrey. *Wordsworth and the Great System: A Study of Wordsworth's Poetic Universe*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. A. Sheridan. London: Penguin, 1977.
- . "The Eye of Power." *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-77*. Ed. Colin Gordon,. Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980. 146—165.
- . *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. London: Penguin, 1979.

- Glaser, Brigitte. "Gendered Childhoods: On the Discursive Formation of Young Females in the Eighteenth Century." *Fashioning Childhood in the Eighteenth Century: Age and Identity*. Ed. Anja Muller,. Aldershot: Ashgate Pub, 2006. 189-198.
- Glover, David and Cora Kaplan. *Genders*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Hirschmann, Nancy J. and Kirstie Morna McClure, eds. *Feminist Interpretations of John Locke: Re-Reading the Canon*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007.
- Jones, Vivien. *Women in the Eighteenth Century. Constructions of Femininity*. Routledge: London, 1990.
- Locke, John. "Letter to Mrs. Clarke, February 1685." *The Educational Writings of John Locke*. Ed. James L. Axtell. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.
- , *Some Thoughts Concerning Education and Of the Conduct of the Understanding*. Ed. Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarcov. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub, 1996.
- Mahoney, John J. *William Wordsworth: A Poetic Life*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1997.
- Mellor, Anne K. *Romanticism and Gender*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- O'Malley, Andrew. *The Making of the Modern Child: Children's Literature and Childhood in the Late Eighteenth Century*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Page, Judith W. *Wordsworth and the Cultivation of Women*. California and London: University of California Press, 1994.
- Richardson, Alan. *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780–1832*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- . "Mary Wollstonecraft on Education." *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*. Ed. Claudia L. Johnson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 24-58.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Émile, or On Education*. Trans. Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books, 1979.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Norton Critical Edition. Ed. Carol H. Poston. New York: Norton, 1988.