

**Gender Politics in the Picturesque, Sublime and Gothic Poetry and
Paintings of the Romantic Age**

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Aesthetic concepts like the picturesque and the sublime which prescribe criteria for what can be considered as beautiful, elegant, pleasant or awe-inspiring, are not objective and universal. They are invented for certain political purposes. They do not just represent nature's beauty and majesty but implicitly suggest the place and station a certain class and especially women in that class are, and should rightly be in. For instance in Luxembourg's painting "**The Avalanche in the Alps**"; a common working woman is equated to an animal as a soulless, mere instinctual being with no sense of beauty and wonder. She reacts to the avalanche merely as a danger to be escaped and fails to recognize and be amazed by the sublime occurrence, unlike the two men present at the scene. Similarly in certain poems like Wordsworth's "**The Solitary Reaper**" the woman with her voice merges with the background. Her song is only a sound (not words with meaning) that contributes to the picturesque effect. In Gothic works of art too woman is seen only in terms of a body that can be subjected to torment, force and exploitation as in Fuseli's "**Nightmare**". This paper attempts to unravel in detail such politics in the romantic representations of women.

Romantic art is often misconstrued as a tribute to Nature, Humanity and Individualism. Its proponents are held in great esteem as ardent devotees of nature and champions of equality and democracy. If we carefully deconstruct each and every sentence and word, their works surface anxiety and subtle yet desperate and powerful attempts to pacify the rising spirit of individualism and democracy. With the tactful and effective use of language they reinforce the existing social order while at the same time seeming to

uproot it. Nature and Women are used as tools to achieve this hidden agenda of subverting the revolution.

Women and Nature become one in this process. Men and that too men exclusively of a certain class consider themselves to be apart from and above nature with women merged into it, deprived of separate identity. They firmly stay outside it and observe, survey and speculate on its prospects.

Wordsworth's poetry is especially representative of this kind of poetry. In the poem "Nutting", a landscape enclosed by thick, flourishing foliage, abundant with hazel nuts, violets and a brook flowing amidst it, is personified as a voluptuous, virgin women. A boy silently usurps the place. Unable to restrain his delight and excitement over the richness of it, he ravages it. Let us look at the following description of the place and the boy's reaction.

"I came to one near nook

Unvisited,.....

.....the hazels rose

Tall and Erect, with **tempting** clusters hung,

A Virgin Scene! A little while I stood,

Breathing with such suppression of heart

As joy delights in; and, with wise restraint

Voluptuous, fearless of a rival, eyed

The **banquet**;....."

The words- '**tempting**', '**A Virgin Scene!**', '**Voluptuous**', '**banquet**'- make the analogy between women and nature clear. Nature here is objectified as a woman. Both exist to be looked at by man, to give him pleasure and satisfy his appetite for food and sex.

“Perhaps it was a bower beneath whose leaves

The violets of **five seasons** re-appear

And fade.....”

The violets of five seasons- the violets which blossom all round the year suggest perennial exploitation. Nature and Women will be there forever at man’s service. He further says:

“.....the shady nook

Of hazels, and the green mossy bower,

Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up

Their quiet being....”

They are also passive victims. They do not resist and silently accept the violence as something that commonly and naturally has to happen to them. Years later he realizes his mistake. He accepts that nature or woman has a spirit and is capable of thought and feeling but instead of making up to his sin himself he entrust the responsibility to another woman. He says:

“I felt a sense of pain when I beheld

The silent trees, and saw the intruding sky-

Then dearest maiden, move along these shades

In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand

Touch- for there is a spirit in the wood.”

One cannot help wondering why instead of feeling penitent and exhorting men to be respectful and gentle towards women he advises and

instructs a woman to be gentle and heal herself or nature of the wounds he inflicted.

In “**The Solitary Reaper**” too a similar infringing male gaze can be felt though more subtle. The poem begins with a sharp, distinct command- “Behold her” and the fact that she is alone too is given unnecessary emphasis. After clearly mentioning that she is alone calling her “Yon solitary Highland Lass”, he reiterates it saying “**Alone** she cuts and binds the grain”. He observes every move and act of her – her “cutting and binding the grain”, “bending over the sickle” etc...Then he applauds quality of her voice, saying:

“O Listen for the vale profound

Is overflowing with the sound”

He creates a picturesque atmosphere – a mountainous terrain with a pleasant weather; pleasant enough to take a leisurely stroll and places a lonely, singing woman at its center only to enhance the aesthetic appeal.

Despite noticing a note of sadness in her voice he does not bother about the meaning of the words she is singing; about what misery she could be possibly going through. He speculates for a while briefly but brushes it away saying “**Whatever theme the maiden sang**”.

The woman with her voice merges with the background, losing her identity, her community- her roots and history as is evident from her being singled out, and becomes a part of an aesthetic experience.

In “**Tintern Abbey**” Wordsworth uses his sister as a tool to propagate himself. The Abbey that is destroyed by the Welsh rebels which is now in ruins, stands for the class of aristocracy and nobility of which Wordsworth is a representative. This class is losing its foot hold and is threatened by the rising spirit of democracy. The poem expresses anxiety and sadness about this world that is dwindling. He entrusts her the responsibility of propagating and keeping it alive. She has no identity of her own except as a

representative and propagator of himself and his world. He patronizes and conditions her for this purpose. The landscape becomes an excuse for him to express himself. He trains his sister to feel, think about the place and remember it in a particular way. He says:

“.....in after years

When these wild ecstasies shall be matured

Into sober pleasure; when thy mind

Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,

Thy memory be as a dwelling place

For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh! Then,

If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,

Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts

Of tender joy wilt thou **remember me**,

And these my exhortations! Nor perchance-

If I should be where I no more can here

Thy voice, nor **catch from thy wild eyes gleams**

Of past existence- Will though then forget

That on the banks of this delightful stream

We stood together; and that **I, so long**

A worshipper of Nature, hither came unwearied in that service; rather say

With warmer love- Oh! With far deeper zeal

Of holier love.”

These lines are a clear expression of Wordsworth's ego mania. His sister has no life of her own. Even in the midst of her own excruciating affairs and cares she has to remember him and what a worshipper of nature he was and tell it to the world.

Now let us look at the portrayal of women in the Sublime and Gothic paintings.



In this painting by **Philip Jacques de Loutherbourg** called '**Avalanche in the Alps**' we see massive rocks of ice and chunks of snow tumbling and flowing down with tremendous speed and force, destroying everything in their way, towards three helpless people- a woman and two men- and a dog. Here we see three different kinds of reactions to the calamity. The man by the left side of the woman, as suggested by his pose, is about to run but stops and turns to look up to the Avalanche with his hands raised and clasped together in worship as if pleading for mercy. The woman and the dog are running without a second thought. The second man is not panicked and is least perturbed. Even his hat is in place unlike the other man's. But he is overwhelmed. He is standing with his legs apart and hands spread, holding a staff in one as though ready to face the Avalanche and be swept off by it.

The first man acknowledges and admires power but his is a slavish worship. He bows down in front of power (figuratively speaking), begs and pleads it for mercy. Nevertheless he can recognize power and be moved by it. Both the woman and the dog run for their lives. For them the Avalanche is a mere danger to be escaped; there is nothing awe- inspiring about it. They are beings who merely live following their instincts. The second man not only recognizes power and is moved by it but stands up to it. Even though he will die, he will die being a part of something so dynamic and tremendous.

In this painting we can unearth certain class and gender politics. The man who stands up to the Avalanche, with his hat, staff and red coat more or less seems to be man of an upper class. The other two people look like commoners. The painting implies that only men of a certain class can recognize Nature's power and stand up to it. Men of other classes may recognize Nature's power but will not stand up to it. They will only fall upon their knees and worship and women like animals are base, instinctive creatures not open to sublime experiences.

Here is a Gothic painting by Swiss, 18th Century artist **Henry Fuseli** called "**Nightmare**".



A woman is being tormented in her sleep by an incubus. An incubus, according to ancient Latin and Greek mythology and folklore, is a male demon that has sexual intercourse with sleeping women. What I find significant in the picture is the horse which is though apparently frightened is still an intruding presence aroused by curiosity. The horse symbolizes a voyeuristic society that seems to take sadistic pleasure in watching women being pursued, coerced and tormented. The picture is very relevant to today's world of entertainment. Every block buster horror movie like for instance "The exorcist", "Scream" or in Tollywood movies like Arundhathi or Chandramukhi has a women being chased or possessed and tormented. There has almost never been a popular horror movie with a man being harassed to this extent. The society in general always seems to enjoy a secrete pleasure in a women's pain, anxiety and struggle.

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