CHAPTER – I

An Exploration of Memory, Perception and Identity
In Keats’s poetry there is an abundance of women. They are an integral part of his poetry and letters. They enter into all aspects of his writing and cannot be contained in a single definition. This thesis examines the changing determinations of women in Keats’s creative processes. Keats presents them in individual as well as universal identities. Keats conceives the poetic muse as feminine:

The muse that Keats invokes in his early poetry is indeed a friend – docile, maidenly, and undemanding. She inspires poetry that remains primarily serene and, more important, largely imitative and illustrative of the past and current male poets, a reliable gauge of poetic achievement to a new poet with no identity of his own.

In the poems of 1817, the feminine entity is an inseparable part of nature. Nature and natural objects are visualized as feminine. ‘Characterized by the feminine traits of prettiness and passivity, she is frequently seen only as a smile, a blush, or a glance of a hesitant eye, and she is easily dismissible because of her mortal state.’

In *Endymion*, Cynthia exercises a mysterious power over Endymion through her charm. He appears as the feminized figure before Cynthia. Peona, Endymion’s sister, is different from the maidens of the early poems. She is a guide and friend and also a precursor to the powerful and autonomous Moneta. She is wise and through her wisdom provides knowledge and assistance to *Endymion*. Moneta, in *The Fall of
Hyperion, is the most powerful woman of Keats’s poetry. She towers above not only women but also men. Rather than being an active seeker the dreamer, in the poem, is afraid of her due to her ambiguous identity. However, she serves as a source of mysterious instincts and profound ancient knowledge.

Isabella and Madeline are full of beauty and charm. They are the idealized projections by the male poet. On the other hand Belle Dame and Lamia are victims of patriarchal atrocities.

The present work also conducts an intensive study of the feminine power and energy acknowledged by Keats throughout the odes. In each ode, the woman presents the central metaphor. In the ‘Ode to Psyche’, Psyche is represented as the goddess by the poet whose status has been marginal for a long time. The poet restores the lost status of Psyche. She is the ideal beauty that inspires the poet to create. The nightingale, in the ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, is a bird that fascinates the poet through its voice. In ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, the urn assimilates the qualities of serenity and maternity. She is a friend and companion to mankind. Melancholy in ‘Ode on Melancholy’ is ‘veiled melancholy’ ruling majestically in the ‘temple of Delight’. To the poet, indolence is desirable because it is full of creativity. Autumn in ‘To Autumn’ is personified as a female figure who continues to hold her power throughout the poem. Keats’s focus on
women is a product of his subconscious. The obscuring patriarchal values dismissed references to women as sub literary. In Keats’s poetry women are symbols of beauty and creativity. However, they also represent the anxiety that the poet experiences in association with them. The patriarchy condemned women as threats to creativity and imagination.

Keats’s letters are a storehouse of emotions and attitudes that define his views about women. His poetry is spontaneous and effortless while the letters reveal a slight self consciousness. According to Tilottama Rajan:

> Letters emerge on the boundary between the public and private: what they say is always provisional and situational. Being written to others, letters raise the problem of self-representation as a masking process: the writer identifies with positions that are created partly in reaction to, or in emulation of, the other person and that do not quite express the "self". ³

Keats’s letters reveal the development of his poetic thought and shed valuable light on his poetry. Through the poignant letters written to Fanny Brawne Keats emerges as a lover pining for his beloved, admiring her beauty; sometimes complaining, sometimes relishing her love. He writes, in the letter of May (?)1820, to Fanny Brawne, ‘I am greedy of you – Do not think of anything but me. Do not live as if I was not existing – Do not forget me.’⁴
In the nineteenth century, women were supposed to occupy their place in the private sphere. ‘Men possessed the capacity for reason, action, aggression, independence, and self-interest. Women inhabited a separate, private sphere, one suitable for the so-called inherent qualities of femininity.’ They were considered ‘a biological entity’ and their female body ‘a sexed body’. Such concepts kept women in the private sphere and prevented their participation in the public realm. According to Rousseau, the education of women ought to be geared to ultimately enrich men’s lives. He argued that women’s place is within the family:

Woman’s empire is an empire of sweetness, dexterity and good-nature... She must reign in her house as a minister in his State, and ensure she is given orders to do what she desires. In this respect the best households are those where women have the most authority; but when she fails to recognize the voice of authority, and when she seeks to usurp her rights and command herself, disorder ensues that can only introduce misery, scandal and dishonour.

Rousseau’s views regarding women received support throughout Europe in the nineteenth century. However, they have also elicited feminist opposition. He considered women fit only for biological functions. In his opinion, ‘Being unable to sublimate their natural passions and desires, women have no sense of justice; they will therefore always prefer to support and protect their own kith and kin rather than accept the principle of equality before the law.’
The power of women was acknowledged by some of the important women writers of the nineteenth century. They wanted to participate in every sphere. The participation of women in a number of political campaigns increased when they became aware of their own strength. They directed their attack against prostitution and slavery. Abolitionism was an anti-slavery movement in the early 1830’s which demanded the abolition of slavery. It emphasized the view that every man was a self owner and had a right over one’s own body.

The legal systems of Europe and America regarding marriage gave husbands complete possession over their wives. A married woman had no legal rights to her property, earnings, freedom of movement, conscience, body or children. Women’s position in society was considered equal to slavery by the early supporters of women’s rights like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott and Susan B. Anthony. According to them, women needed to be financially independent and strong. However, women’s position did not change overnight:

Throughout the nineteenth century, women and their male allies challenged these hold-overs of the aristocratic patriarchal society. They sought property rights, education and employment opportunities, and the right to divorce. These legal disabilities, they insisted, did not protect women in the domestic sphere of home and family but rather exposed them to the brutalities of the world at large.
Among the nineteenth century early feminists, Mary Wollstonecraft occupies an important place. Her feminist work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) presents a retort to Rousseau’s views regarding women and argues for the need to provide decent education and even co-education for women.

Mary Wollstonecraft was born in London in 1759. She was the eldest daughter of the five children. She saw the tyrannical attitude of her father toward her meek and submissive mother. The unpleasant family circumstances forced Mary to leave home at the age of nineteen. She served as a companion to a widow in Bath. After her mother’s death, she lived with a close friend Fanny Blood and took to needlework to earn a living. She rescued her sister Eliza from a cruel husband. She established a school at Newington Green with Fanny Blood and her sisters. But due to financial reasons it had to be closed. Her personal life was also not pleasant. Her first marriage with American Gilbert Imlay was unsuccessful. Later she married William Godwin but, unfortunately, died during childbirth.

*A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) is considered an important text in the history of feminism. It is a political as well as an educational treatise of women’s social, legal, political and economic equality. It celebrates the rationality of women. Wollstonecraft rejects the
belief that women do not possess rational faculty and that they are slaves to their passions. She believes that girls are trained by the family to be docile. If they are given the right opportunities from an early age, they will prove themselves in the same areas as men. According to psychologists Nancy Chodorow Carol Gilligan 'gender identification is a product of the social environment, specifically of a mother’s nurturing style, rather than an inborn response.'

Margaret Fuller is an author, editor and teacher of nineteenth century America. She made her contribution to the American Renaissance in the field of literature and reform movements. According to Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, Margaret Fuller 'possessed more influence on the thought of American women than any woman previous to her time.' She started language classes for women and held conversations for women to enable them to discuss their views freely and explore knowledge in different areas.

The most important work of Margaret Fuller is the essay, 'The Great Lawsuit: Man vs. Men and Woman vs. Women' written in 1843. She enlarged this essay and published a recast in 1845 entitled Woman in the Nineteenth Century. It can be called a manifesto of the Women's Rights Movement. She projects the oppression of the female sex and demands equal status, '[...]' hers is the ablest, bravest, broadest, assertion
yet made of what are termed Woman's Rights. The works of these writers served to enlighten the nineteenth century minds. Women were given more space.

The women in Keats’s own life wielded a positive influence on his poetry. His female relatives included his grandmother, mother, sister, his beloved and some friends. His relationships provided him with memories and fantasies of identification with the conventional feminine domains. When transferred to his poetry, they transcended actual experience.

One of the most profound influences upon Keats’s life was his mother. She has been accused of being impulsive and erratic due to her remarriage two months after the death of her husband. Keats was greatly attached to his mother. ‘The effect of this remarriage on the children must have been profound, especially on John. He was his mother's favorite, and his passionate possessive nature towards her had already shown itself.'

The nineteenth century was woman-centered. The role of the mother was very important:

The mother - child relationship was at the heart of the new model of familial domesticity. Children came to fulfill an emotional and sentimental role within the family, as opposed to a financial role, and this required intensive parental and especially maternal involvement with children.
Keats had a deep involvement with his mother but the emotional and sentimental role was not fulfilled in Keats's case because she did not live with the children. This created in Keats a deep insecurity that stayed with him throughout his life. According to Joseph Severn, 'Keats used to say that his great misfortune had been that from his infancy he had no mother.' When she returned, she was a sick woman. Keats nursed her all through her sickness. She also showered her affection on him. Her sudden death shattered him totally.

Maternal care was provided to the Keats children by their grandmother. She tried her best to give them the love and understanding. Keats acknowledged his attachment. Her death affected them equally but it brought great changes in the life of Fanny Keats. She had to live with her guardian Abbey at Walthamstow. It was a trend that 'unmarried and widowed women could find a place for themselves, either incorporated into the household of kin or, if finances were tight, of an unrelated family.' Keats was extremely concerned about her well being. She was not allowed to meet her brothers. This troubled Keats a great deal. He tried to behave like a responsible brother. 'To care for his small sister was for Keats an exercise of normality to balance the inexplicable contradiction of nature that seemed to surround their mother.'
This thesis explores Keats's poetry and letters from the standpoint of deconstructive phenomenology. Deconstruction in literacy criticism denotes a practice of reading which dismantles the establishment of any boundary, unity and fixity of meaning. 'More specifically, deconstruction aims its critique against a conception of knowledge and meaning as graspable essences that independently precede or follow expression.' The term deconstruction has been originated by the French thinker Jacques Derrida. His major books *Of Grammatology, Writing and Difference* and *Speech and Phenomena* are published in 1967.

With the help of deconstruction, a text can be used to support two opposite or contradictory points. Deconstruction offers an alternative to traditional scholarship, to identify strands of narrative, threads of meaning. It also shows that texts contradict their own logic. Deconstructionists practice reading with the aim of unmasking internal contradictions in the text. The aim of it is to show the disunity which apparently seems to possess unity. A literary text lacks a totalized boundary that makes it an entity. That unity is broken by the play of internal contradiction and self-conflicting forces. The deconstructionists look for gaps, breaks, fissures and discontinuities of all kinds. Thus it can be said that:
The word “deconstruction” suggests that such criticism is an activity turning something unified back to detached fragments or parts. It suggests the image of a child taking apart his father's watch, reducing it back to useless parts, beyond any reconstitution. A deconstructionist is not a parasite but a parricide. He is a bad son demolishing beyond hope of repair the machine of Western metaphysics.

In its approach to literature as primarily subjective, phenomenology studies the structures of consciousness which is experienced from the first person point of view. That experience is intentional and directed toward something or objects.

Phenomenology is the study of ‘phenomenon’, appearances of things as they appear in our experience. According to Husserl:

Objects can be regarded not as thing in themselves but as things posited or ‘intended’ by consciousness. All consciousness is consciousness of something: in thinking, I am aware that my thought is ‘pointing towards’ some object. The act of thinking and the object of thought are internally related, mutually dependent. My consciousness is not just a passive registration of the world, but actively constitutes or ‘intends’ it.

Phenomenological movement as a philosophical method was started in the first half of the 20th century by Edmund Husserl. The term phenomenology is not only restricted to sensory qualities of seeing; hearing etc. rather the range of phenomenology is much wider than that. It includes the meaning things have in our experience, the significance of objects, events, tools, the flow of time, the self and others.
In phenomenological criticism, all the stylistic and semantic aspects of a text are considered as having organic unity. Phenomenology blurs the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. It is an attempt to understand and describe phenomena exactly as they appear in an individual’s consciousness.

This thesis deals with deconstructive phenomenology combining both deconstruction and phenomenology. Deconstruction is a kind of strategy which departs from traditional scholarship. It challenges and attacks the old and established views. Phenomenology considers a text as an embodiment of the author’s consciousness. All of its stylistic and semantic aspects are grasped as organic parts of a complex totality of which the unifying essence is the author’s mind. When we apply deconstructive phenomenology the unity or totality of the text are dismantled.

Feminism is not single movement. It involves social theories, political movements, and moral philosophies, largely concerned with the experiences of women in relation to their social, political and economic situation. ‘The term came into English from French in 1890s, replacing the word womanism. It refers to “the doctrine of equal rights for women based on the theory of the equality of the sexes.”’ At the social level, it focuses on eradicating gender inequality and encouraging women’s
rights. Feminist literary criticism emerges from the Women’s movement of the 1960’s. Its goal is to reveal the ‘misogyny of literary practice.’ Elain Showalter says ‘There is no Mother of Feminist Criticism.’ She does not want women to only be readers. She emphasizes her point, ‘The program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories.’

Critics like Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Ellman and Kate Millett recognize that throughout literary history women have been considered as the ‘other’. Simone de Beauvoir is of the opinion that women have been made inferiors and the oppression has been compounded by men’s belief that women are inferiors by nature. But she believes that ‘One is not born a woman; rather, one becomes, a woman.’

Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* (1790) used the term patriarchy to define the cause of women’s oppression. According to her, patriarchy subordinates the female to the male. She makes a distinction between sex and gender. Sex is decided by biology while gender is a psychological concept which refers to culturally acquired sexual identity. In Keats’s poems and letters sometimes this ambivalent attitude is visible but it cannot be adhered to very long by the poet. He recognizes the female power.
In Keats's major poems women possess power and authority. Their presence is life giving and regenerative to men. They are autonomous and free to evolve in their own way. They cannot be tamed or controlled. Precluding the views of third-wave feminism which stresses equality, Keats's women aspire for it. Equality does not limit gender or sexual expression. Being a woman is just as worthwhile as being a man, and equality includes respecting women's choices.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2. Ibid. p. 13.


