INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Age: A Patriarchal Mirror and a Female Reflection

Never flinch,
But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
Upon the burning lava of a song
The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:¹

Although the above-quoted lines from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s most ambitious epic poem, *Aurora Leigh*, may seem to be almost audacious, a woman poet could seldom have found a more felicitous expression to depict an age that came to be characteristically marked by a remarkable repertoire of literature by women writers. However presumptuous it may seem, the poet here conjures up the image of a dominant matriarchal figure by way of employing a rather digressive, yet strongly symbolic, metaphor of a nurturing mother. The smouldering lava flows from the bosom of the ‘full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age’ that belonged to Victoria. The way in which this undaunted effort of the woman poet to create an ‘unscrupulous’ epic, containing a peremptory remark to ‘catch’ the vibrant femininity of the age, is expressed appears to W. C. Roscoe to be a ‘contrast’ that may be conceived as ‘almost savage’. Feeling exasperated, he vehemently records: ‘Burning lava and a woman’s breast! …. It is almost pain to read it.’ He considers such sensibilities to be overwhelmingly marked by a ‘sort of forward familiarity’. Besides, the ‘uneasiness’ he experienced while he confronted this representation

reassured him that ‘[n]o man could have written it’. This reaction does certainly characterize the nature of Barrett Browning’s mammoth epic venture in which she undertakes a mighty creative hazard in depicting the life of an accomplished woman poet who acquires prominence and prosperity in London, much in the way in which her creator achieves it. The most significant revelation of the ‘woman question’ in the contemporary domain of Victorian literature can also be traced in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, one of the most subtle and profound women poets across the Atlantic, as well as in the work of Christina Rossetti in Britain, particularly where a female reconsideration of conventionally male-governed structures was audaciously attempted.

The Victorian ‘woman question’ encompassed diverse debates on women and their vocation, their right to enfranchisement, issues of single as well as ‘fallen’ women, and the strongly presupposed dogma of ‘separate spheres’ that was supposed to distinctly demarcate the sphere of the male from that of the female, the last being the most predominant conviction of the day. What becomes noticeable is a remarkable disappointment concerning the status of women in the works of several women poets of the time. Moreover, it was an immense responsibility of the learned women to examine why female accomplishments were so exceptionally disparaged. In keeping with this tendency of thought, the subsequent literary critical discourses worked to re-orient twentieth-century notions about Victorian women’s writing, which have often repudiated such literature as being too maudlin, too confined in their profundity and too passé to communicate to a twentieth-century intelligentsia significantly. Cora Kaplan, in the most refined of initial feminist interpretations, begins her critique by examining how Rossetti and Emily Dickinson deploy illusion as a mode of analyzing female experience. Kaplan asserts that we

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should be cognizant about the manner in which these ‘texts speak to and about psychic phenomena in ways that are unique in women’s writing of the period’.³ Kaplan also affirms that Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* ‘undoubtedly remains an exploration of women’s sexual fantasy which includes suggestions of masochism, homoeroticism, rape or incest’.⁴ Certainly *Goblin Market* turns out to be one of the most convincing documents for feminist critics striving to trace a recognizable female literary tradition.

Such critical analyses thus corroborate the fact that the endeavour of these nineteenth-century poets towards achieving self-definition appears to correspond to the present-day concerns with equal possibilities for men and women in all domains of human experience. At the same time, there have also been substantial difficulties in considering that poetry by Victorian women anticipates the cardinal views of the Women’s Liberation Movement, as it evolved in the 1970s. The most complicated problem emerges from the belief that there was a convention of writing by women that was supposed to be identified as being completely different from the established literary canon. But such a distinct and contrastive classification of literary approach may also be perilous. Margaret Reynolds forewarns feminist critics against claiming a ‘separate sphere’ for women’s literature, due to the fact that such a proposition may be based on the principle pertaining to the typically secluded and domestic sphere being assigned to women at the time, a reason why they were deprived of worthy consideration as creative artists. As a result, Reynolds asserts that a ‘dangerous feminist folk-poetics is … created – dangerous because it is,

in fact, not more than a restatement of the classic values relating to women and poetry. Hence, feminist criticism needs to be circumspect about echoing some of the most defacing suppositions against the essence of womanhood that have been firmly implanted in the Western ways of life and that have considerably contributed to relegate the creative accomplishments of women to the periphery of all critical attention.

In the United States, the most striking woman’s utterance can be identified with that of Emily Dickinson, a poet who took up subjectivity as her theme and seclusion as an inseparable part of her existence. Her poetry, as well as her letters, is marked with condensed, elliptical and contemplative features, in which the poetic characters do not only embody female subjectivity, but also represent the dilemma of the artist as an ontological enigma.

The Victorians did admit their dual paradigm of thought and practice. In spite of the fact that the age had comprehensively investigated the innate scope of the subliminal state of the mind, it was plagued by the underlying existence of class in the society. Duality was its prime characteristic. Considering the fundamental traits of the age, a Victorian female poet had to assume a two-fold role when she attempted to identify herself within the poetic line of descent. Her predicament may be conceived as an imitation, rather contradictorily, of the Victorian understanding of writing poetry as being a woman’s task. Simple and natural poetic themes were associated by nineteenth-century critics with true and unconstrained revelation of emotions – an ingenuous expression that is still presumed by critics to be a peculiar trait of women. Emily Dickinson’s poetry brings out the disagreement in the dual role of the woman poet more as an indispensable thematic strain than as an impediment. Dickinson perused Barrett Browning’s

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poetry with ardent consideration and perhaps she, in some ways either explicit or implicit, had also been able to transcend such art through her writings. Dickinson prefers to locate her subjects either within the sepulchre or without, and they distinctively correspond to flowers, children and to elements of inconsequentiality, vulnerability and silence. But, in spite of such seemingly passive traits, they claim their authority in their dissent against the conventional patriarchal ascendancy. The strain between the contradictory approaches of passivity on the one hand, and refusal to accept a conventionally dominating social condition on the other, is crucial both to the significance of the poems and to their structure. Moreover, Dickinson superseded her British contemporaries in that she considered the plausibility of either an unnatural correspondence or a completely uniform relation between the subject and the object. Her treatment of the subject-object relations indicates that the consequence was going to be an unnerving deadlock which perhaps implies the reason why Barrett Browning and Rossetti, being more acquiescent to accepted forms, did not discard the idea of an apparent discrepancy between poetic expression and intention that the question of writing as a woman entails.

The emergence of a female poetic tradition does not necessarily hold criticisms that deal with the relationship between women poets and a male tradition of poetry untenable. For instance, Barrett Browning, having no sufficient and continuing female tradition of poetry behind her, adhered to such a convention that is determinable by and even identifiable with a male poetic authority that enabled her to bring upon herself the poetic right to write. But this dialectic seems to hold no sway because it can effortlessly be traced in the poems of rejection throughout the nineteenth century, particularly in those of Letitia Landon who wrote during the early part of the century and Amy Levy who wrote during the latter part of the century. The poems by Landon and Levy are as engaging for their incongruities as for their indistinguishable subject matter.
Landon conceives of marriage as a culminating point of time that involves self-immolation and oppression. Levy sees such a finality as reinforcing a patriarchal notion, since men gain advantage from promiscuity which in turn perpetuates the possible threats of heterosexual partnerships. In Landon’s case, a blatant sexual politics marks the conventions and practices that hinder women: for instance, Barrett Browning’s remonstration against the indoctrinations that are imparted to women, tutoring them for marriage in *Aurora Leigh* and acclimatizing them to being acquiescent. Again, there is Christina Rossetti’s ardent aspiration to be a ‘man’ when she says: ‘I wish, and I wish I were a man’. Later in the century, one comes across more unrelenting utterances of disapproval in the works of Augusta Webster and Mathilde Blind.

Hence, it is evident from the works of these women writers that a woman’s tradition was constructed on the basis of a complete and direct impugnment against subjugation, both literary and social. But, such a strong disapproval of a tradition of male hegemony often resulted in an explicit account of women’s oppression, whereby poetry remained unretrieved. All poems, in this way, unanimously came to voice the condition of women as they were situated in a particular point of time in the social and literary history of patriarchy. Thus, the content and language of such poems became problematically centralized on one particular idea.

The creation of a woman’s tradition confronts an identical impediment when a distinctive female domain of experience is taken into consideration, since it would only serve to perpetuate the difference between the two spheres of experience, male and female, which again in its turn would result in a literary confinement of women’s art to an entirely separate style or approach of writing. This may perceivably prove to be perilous and hence such art, though attempted by

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several women poets and critics of the nineteenth century who tried to achieve for women an unscathed position in literature, needs to be cautious since feminine sensibilities and the different modes of experience are conceived as being wholly discrepant from the domain of male thought, perception and sphere of existence.

The gender-based identification of poets as specifically ‘women’ is not beyond the idea of ‘a group’ of women poets being considered as commensurate with ‘a single’ male poet. Though the establishment of a distinctive female tradition is more often than not prone to be beset with such a pitfall, the dialectic of a familiar theme of subjection becomes clearly manifest. Most significantly, what can be traced from the works of women poets and critics of the time are the social predicaments of women, the adversities they experienced as writers and the manner in which these obstacles were overcome. It is certainly obvious that through the writings of these authors is revealed a defiance against canonical male literature that so blatantly demonstrated the gender bias which, in its turn, actually facilitated the marginalization of literature by women.

The nineteenth century witnessed its inception in the conclusion of the French Revolution, sustaining in the process through the Napoleonic wars and terminating with a crucial imperial encounter, the second Anglo-Boer War. Quite evidently, the era begins with a type of poetry in consonance with the most conspicuous conviction concerning gender where Edmund Burke\(^7\) conceives of femininity as essentially pertaining to the injudicious and non-intellectual. Hence, femininity came to be signified more by the sensuous attributes of grace than by artistic brilliance. The thematics of the New Woman evolved as a symbol marking the culmination of the century rather than a reality. The concept went a long way in formulating a systematized

feminist politics that manifested itself in the most elaborate modes through the efforts of the suffragists. The New Woman turned out to be their precursor, being enlightened with higher education and claiming equality in private spheres.

Women’s poetry has since then encountered several onslaughts of conventional and conformist standards of thought and practice since it sought to give expression to the hidden and personal experience through language, a subject that was formerly taken up only as a supplementing device. In fact, Victorian poems were thought only to reflect virtuous qualities much in consonance with the kind of propriety that women were supposed to observe in their social behaviour, apart from providing a sentimental support to men in the midst of their multiple engagements in life. Such a status might have prompted women to write poetry but, at the same time, the distinctive features of the Victorian concept of the female, including qualities like docility, submission and quietude, tended to impede such creative writing. Hence, the doubt, according to the Victorians, lay in the fact that women themselves being conventional objects of art were seldom in a position to create. ‘For a woman artist is’, maintain Gilbert and Gubar, ‘after all, a woman – that is her “problem” – and if she denies her own gender she inevitably confronts an identity crisis as severe as the anxiety of authorship she is trying to surmount.’

Gilbert and Gubar also summarize aptly the ‘anxiety of authorship’ felt by Dickinson and Rossetti by describing their experiences in the following manner:

Emily Dickinson declares in one breath that she “had been hungry, all the Years”, and in another opts for “Sumptuous Destitution”. Similarly, Christina Rossetti represents her

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own anxiety of authorship in the split between one heroine who longs to “suck and suck” on goblin fruit and another who locks her lips fiercely together in a gesture of silent and passionate renunciation. In addition, many of these literary women become in one way or another agoraphobic. Trained to reticence, they fear the vertiginous openness of the literary marketplace and rationalize with Emily Dickinson that “publication – is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man” or worse, punningly confess that “Creation seemed a mighty Crack / To make me visible”.9

As for Elizabeth Barrett Browning, she became the ‘spiritual mother’ of Emily Dickinson and was ‘perpetually inspired by the “inscient vision” with which she solved the vexing “problem” of poetry by women’.10 Gilbert and Gubar cite from an entry in Margaret Fuller’s journal in order to enunciate this problem:

For all the tides of life that flow within me, I am dumb and ineffectual, when it comes to casting my thought into a form. No old one suits me. If I could invent one, it seems to me the pleasure of creation would make it possible for me to write … I love best to be woman; but womanhood is at present too straitly-bounded to give me scope. At hours, I live truly as a woman; at others, I should stifle; as, on the other hand, I should palsy, when I play the artist.11

The following chapters of this study will attempt to explore these diverse ‘tides of life’ that a woman poet experiences or, in other words, that Barrett Browning, Rossetti and Dickinson as poets might have experienced, since they belonged to an Age that was so constraining as not to give them their due literary place. They almost presumptuously, though often covertly, questioned the traditional ideals of femininity and gave expression to their creative anxiety either through a poetic representation of their self and subjectivity (Chapter 1), or through their poems

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9 Ibid., p. 58.
10 Ibid., p. 580.
11 Ibid., p. 71.
on love (Chapter 2), or through those on nature (Chapter 3), or through their belief in religion (Chapter 4), or through their concept of death (Chapter 5). More than carving out a niché for themselves, they have certainly been able to create a literary tradition of their own that is no less unique, enduring and self-sufficient in the ‘literary marketplace’ than that of the commonly accepted forms of male canonical literature, so as to stay in the minds of posterity and thrive for ages to come.