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Questioning the Canon: Feminine English Romanticism

Shiva Raj Pantar* PhD and Laxmi Regmi

pantashivaraj@gmail.com /

laxmiregmi07@gmail.com

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Abstract

Addressing the need for the historical phenomenon called Romanticism merits its gendered study or the female-authored Romantic literature. Although the cursory and introductory configurations of the terra incognita might risk the lopsided position, the inclinations to reconfigurations and the question of terra incognita itself are assumed the valuable efforts. This research paper questions the traditional English Romanticism that is all about the Big six male poets Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Shelly, Keats and Byron. This paper, thus, employs the comparative analysis method embedded in the textual analysis method. The analytical framework includes: the inclusion of critical statements and the incorporation of conventional themes. To that end, two representative women poets of Romanticism: Felicia Dorothea Hemans and Mary Robinson and their four poems have been chosen for consideration. Hemans' "Casabianca" and "I Dream of All Things Free"; Robinson's "Ode to Beauty" and "Elegy on the Death of Lady Middleton". The analysis has established the need for alternative Romanticism: Feminine Romanticism is an effort to question the hegemonic masculine Romanticism. Female writers also have been adequately capable of pursuing the continuities and innovations in regard to the Romantic studies.

Key Words: Feminine Romanticism, Big Six, Alternative Romanticism, Independence, Canonical Romanticism

The Context of the Study

Romanticism in English literature that started in the late eighteenth century with the poets William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge continued into the nineteenth century with the second-generation Romantic poets, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats and Lord Byron. They were considered the big six poets. Dirk Dunbar (2017) tellingly states in his text *Renewing the Balance*: "The so-called big six affirmed the movement's ambitions" (p.158). They were the exclusive poets who were shouldered to carry on the ambitions of the movement: the meditation on the nature and the human conditions.

The time of Romanticism is historically regarded as a masculine phenomenon. Anne

* Shiva Raj Pantar is a Lecturer of English at Central Department of English, TU, Kirtipur.

* Laxmi Regmi is an M.Phil. in English. She is a Lecturer at Shahid Smarak College, Kirtipur.

K. Mellor (1993) painfully maintains and questions, “masculine mind can receive the pleasure from the silencing of the female (p.19). This statement by Mellor asks us to think hard and for a prolonged period before embracing it fully. One has to have adequate explanations and evidence to accept the claim that males’ mind receives pleasure while silencing the females. Nonetheless, this seems very true in the periodization of the Romantic Movement. This period that highlights the big six male writers is deeply flawed: this is the underlying assumption of this research paper. Shockingly, anyone studying literature studies mostly these six poets.

There were many female writers apart from the writers chosen for this paper: Dorothea Hemans and Mary Robinson. But they were treated as secondary to carry on the ethos of the era. Matthew Sangster (2021) in *Living as an Author in Romantic period* brings forth the idea that “defining women writers as secondary Romantics blurred them into a tradition that many of them strongly opposed” (p.40). When poets like Hemans and Robinson have written poems such as Hemans’ “Casabianca” and “I Dream of All Things Free”; “Ode to Beauty” and “Elegy on the Death of Lady Middleton,” surprisingly enough, it is a historical error to exclude them from the poets who contributed to the Romantic ethos and ambitions. Despite having such an influential presence of female poets, eschewing their contribution is a problematic instance, this research problem paves the path of this article’s evidences and their analysis.

Objective

The objective of this research essay is to add a discussion of the alternative to canonical Romanticism whereby feminine Romanticism is rendered a spotlight. Albeit from a cursory and introductory study, this paper aims to add a slice at the boundary of the Romantic era.

Literature review

The search, survey, review, and analysis of literature on critical Romanticism highlight the need for reconstituting canonical Romanticism. Critics such as K. Mellor, Caroline Franklin, Christopher John Murray, Liwanag Huttenmuller, Carmen Casaliggi and Porscha Fermanis have majorly discussed the necessity of alternative Romanticism that challenges the masculine Romanticism. These critics’ focus can be summed up in a phrase- the subordination of women Romantic writers. Many thinkers might account for this subordination to the social and cultural forces. There could be numerous reasons for this.

Anne K. Mellor comprehensively discusses how and why the female writers in the Romantic era were subsided. Nonetheless, she suggests to the readers that the “uncharted expanse of women’s literary romanticism” must be explored. (1993, p.20). Mellor has been cited for her almost exhaustive study on the female writers of the period. In a way, anyone intending to remap the literary landscape of Romantic period must find it a seminal work in that she has developed a searching analysis with the incision in her

text.

Caroline Franklin states that the “female novelist peers” of the Romantic period were “often stereotyped as domestic and social” (2013, p.1). Franklin’s contention subsumes the subject matter of female writing. There was a genre called flower verse reserved for women writers. Since they were confined to the domestic sphere, their composition would not have included the broader themes that the big six could have done. This stereotype also must have caused the presence of the female writers in the period as the secondary writers.

Christopher John Murray in *Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era (1760-1850)* has focused on the genre and gender of the Romantic era, “The feminist critique of Romanticism as a masculine and exclusionary poetic practice has centered on the figure of the Romantic poet.” (2004, p.343). Murray’s stance elucidates that the era is masculine because female writers could not and would not have been able to have access to genres such as odes and elegies. His stance is acceptable because the age is the great reminder of masculine dominance. Nonetheless, women did not have a presence in generic writing such as ode is a problematic stance because many women writers have had a dominant presence in this genre.

Liwanag Huttenmuller discusses the expectations of society. Males and females were expected to perform differently:

In the eighteenth century, it was considered improper for a woman to write publicly, and if she did, she was rather judged as a woman, not as a writer. If she refused to be modest, self-deprecating, subservient, refused to present her artistic productions as mere trifles designed to divert and distract readers in moments of idleness, she could expect to be ignored or (sometimes scurrilously) attacked. (2008, p.5)

Carmen Casaliggi and Porscha Fermanis humorously state that the big six Romantic poets die young and it is only the female writers who remain (2016, p.15). The big six poets did not live longer; they had a very short life span. However, women writers and women lived longer and should live longer in that they had the poetic caliber for the establishment of the Romantic ethos and ambitions.

The literature shows that the attempt to reconfigure the alternative Romanticism is not merely the outcome of the researcher’s impulse. Instead, the efforts have been made. This research paper is an addition to that effort with the discussion of Hemans’ and Robinson’s selected poems.

Methods

Comparison is at the heart of human reasoning skill. This research essay employs the comparative analysis for the alternative Romantic studies. In addition, textual analysis is used to reach the claim that women writers too were powerful enough. Benoit Rihoux and Charles C. Ragin (2009) find that comparison is “a basic, and powerful mental operation” that can be developed into “comparative methods or techniques” (p.xvii).

Along with the study of historical background, four poems by the women writers have been selected for the textual analysis. Alan McKee (2003) discusses the purpose of textual analysis, “When we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations” (p.1). The poems belong to the themes such as obedience, freedom, beauty and death. The researchers analyzed the poems and saw the connections among the poems showing how the poems contain a common thematic configuration: the quest for independence. Alongside, the comparison among the poems that are the corpus of this study has been made on the themes of obedience, beauty, ode and elegy. The comparative discussion is not between the poets chosen here. Instead, the comparison is made with the poets beyond the discussion here. The odes and elegies were not only the genres reserved the males, the female poets too were well-versed in them. The unconventional wisdom was not only the domain of males. Even the female poets in the era contained such valuable wisdom that freedom was their need as male poets in the Romantic era had been asking for. In this line of reasoning, the thematic comparison is made between the male poets and the female poets to argue that eschewing the female poets from the scene is an historic error. The analytical framework employed in the textual analysis is twofold: the inclusion of critical statements and the incorporation of the conventional themes. For instance, Hemans and Robinson have used conventional themes such as death, beauty, obedience and freedom. However, the treatment is unconventional. Hemans intends to avoid wholesale obedience and Robinson avoids the unquestioned acceptance of beauty.

Results and Discussion

Literary romanticism in British literature seems to have taken the image of male flavor. If romanticism is seen from the female writers, our impressions would not be the same. In a straightforward manner, romanticism might not merely mean the discussion of six male poets. Romanticism can be analyzed from the view of gender and sexuality to show how women writers could make a career in the male-dominated time of Romanticism. During the Romantic period of British Literature, women were increasingly creative writers, writing about their own thoughts and experiences on the topic. Using language that was easy to understand, these women used their experiences to advocate for more free treatment from both men as individuals as well as society at large. Fighting to obtain better rights, to advocate that position explained that the idea of feminine equality followed logically from the arguments being put forth during this time period regarding individual liberties. As the females in the Mediaeval Period and Renaissance Period were expected to be good at needlework and dancing, this period was not limited to such works by females.

Romantic era authors debated issues such as women’s rights, democracy, freedom, and many others, in an effort to make a change for the better in the prevailing social structures of the day. All of the authors who contributed to the discussion of women’s

issues came from different backgrounds, had different experiences and perceptions, as well as different levels of education; consequently, each had different visions of what social improvement for women would look like. Not only did these writers impact other writers of their own era, their writings also impacted future generations of writers and are still part of the discussion today.

In this discussion, the poems by two representative women poets of Romanticism: Felicia Dorothea Hemans and Mary Robinson subsume the reasoned choices. They include the critical statement on the issue of obedience, the wish for full-fledged freedom, downsides of the beauty and the deployment of a powerful genre called elegy. In addition, these poems cannot be considered weaker versions of creativity compared to the big six poets. The selected poems are as powerful as the so-called mainstream poems. The poems by Hemans' "Casabianca" and "I Dream of All Things Free"; and Robinson's "Ode to Beauty" and "Elegy on the Death of Lady Middleton" go against the dominant spirit of the age and establish the statement that the female writers in the Romantic Period should not have treated as the secondary writers.

"Casabianca" considers the case of a father and a son. The poem is a statement about obedience to a father. This parable of duty, obedience and followership also contains the critical statement that obedience is necessary in some cases and in other cases seeking permission is a problem. Rather, the independence is what is considered a prudent case. In the poem, Casabianca, the young Casabianca perished because he waited for his father's command, who was already dead that Casabianca did not know. Waiting for the instructions of a father who is already dead could not be considered the obedience: Casabianca "call'd aloud: 'Say, Father,/ say/If yet my task is done?/ He knew not that the chieftain lay/ unconscious of his son (396)." The young boy has been asking for permission with his father. Although his father is unconscious, his level of obedience is so extreme that he is still seeking permission from his father. This poem is one of the representative poems in the literature of obedience: "And shouted but once more loud,/ 'My father! must I stay?'/ While over him fast, through sail / shroud,/ The wreathing fires made way (396)." The response from the father did not come. The response came from the fire. This deplorable situation is so painful that fire answers instead of the father. Even then the son is waiting for the father's response. Consequently: " But the noblest thing which peris'd / there/ Was that young faithful heart! (396)" The result is that the boy is collapsed by the fire. If we are to think further, we need to think about the mistakes committed by the son. Is obedience a problem? What was his fault?

Her other significant poem is "I Dream of All Things Free". In this poem, "I Dream of All Things Free", the speaker mentions, "My heart in chains is bleeding,/ And I dream of all things free!(p.337)." The poetic persona has so many dreams: "I dream of some proud bird, / A bright-eyed mountain king! (337) "I dream of all things free!/ of gallant, gallant bark,/ That sweeps through storm and sea,/ Like an arrow to its mark! (336)" The persona has the dreams of being unhindered. Could it be that the poet is

externalizing her inner voice to mean that she is under control? Even if we detach this biographical element, the persona's wish not to remain in control can be a statement of feminine voices. This poem, in contrast to Casabianca is a quest for freedom. The common thread between these two poems is that both of them are hinting at the power of independence. The former one shows the problems of obedience. If Casabianca had not waited for his father's command and he would have acted on his own, he would have been saved from the fire. The latter poem is a direct expression of freedom. Why do these poems discuss the themes of the independence? The thoughts are straightforward if not easy. The historical consciousness is the witness when we know that these poems are composed by a Romantic female poet.

To corroborate, "Ode to Beauty" by Robinson constitutes an unconventional wisdom about beauty. The poem would not declare that beauty is truth and vice versa. Instead, it discusses the darker sides of the beauty. Could it be that Robinson might have suffered because of her beauty? That could be a biographical interpretation. Transcending this biographical burden, the beauty has beautiful parts with it. Nonetheless, it summons the dangers along with it. Indeed, the poem is a statement about the downsides of beauty: "EXULTING BEAUTY, phantom of an hour,/ Whose magic spells enchain the heart,/ Ah! what avails thy fascinating pow'r,/ Thy thrilling smile, thy witching art?/ Thy lip, where balmy nectar glows; (99)" The way beauty is perceived requires reconsideration because the perception can be a betrayal. Understanding beauty from a single perspective derives problematic consequences. The persona has been cautioning not to take beauty in a conventional way. What is beautiful has ugliness in it. This uncritical perception has to be doubted: "April's meekest child,/ With myrtle blossoms undefil'd,/ Thy mild and spotless mind pourtray'd;/ Dear blushing maid, of cottage birth,/ 'Twas thine, o'er dewy meads to stray,/ While sparkling health, and frolic mirth/ Led on thy laughing Day. (100)" The beauty seems to have seduced the people. It is considered the April's meekest child. It seems to have caused the laughter. However, the laughter is deceptive one: "Thy silent tear reveals thy woe;/ TIME strews with thorns thy mazy way,/ Where'er thy giddy footsteps stray,/ Thy thoughtless heart is doom'd to find/ An unrelenting foe" (100). The beauty is an enemy. These lines turn out to be very explicit because the worst form of beauty is displayed.

Robinson's next poem, "Elegy on the Death of Lady Middleton" contains the mood of elegy. Robinson writes an elegy on the death of poet Lady Middleton. The reasoned case is that female poets such as Robinson have equally crafted poetry related to the elegy: "No more her converse shall delight the heart;/ No more her smile benign spread pleasure round;/ No more her liberal bosom shall impart/ The balm of pity to Affliction's wound. (p.62)

The poem in no way diminishes the features of elegy tradition: "Nor did those Virtues flaunt their innate rays,/ To court applause, or charm the vulgar throng,/ No ostentatious glare illum'd her days,/ No idle boast escap'd her tuneful tongue. (p.62)" Ultimately, the

persona confesses that the dead must have entered the sky or some other better realm. This acceptance of elegy is expressed thus: Calm resignation smil'd upon her cheek,/ And HOPE'S refulgent beam illum'd her eye;/ While FAITH, celestial VIRTUE'S handmaid meek,/ On wings of seraphs bore her to the sky. (p.62). This poem contains the elements of an elegy. This poem, thus, is a response to the critics that women would have been able to have access to the Romantic genre called poetry.

The analysis of the selected poems hints at the comparative study between the male Romantic poets and female Romantic poets. As the male poets have a preoccupation of themes such as independence, freedom and fresh treatment of the subject at hand, these female poets also have command over those concerns. The odes and elegies are not reserved to the male domains. Even the female poets have demonstrated their command over such genres. In this regard, the comparative framework between the male poets and the female poets is made so that female epistemology is not deemed weaker and eschewing them from the scene is considered a problem.

Conclusion

This research essay is an attempt to contribute to the critical need of the historical period known as Romanticism. Much has been discussed and highlighted that males were the dominant figures of this age. However, questioning that canon, the paper has made a modest claim that neither the genre nor the subject matter was foreign to the female writers of the age. They were writing on beauty, they had composed the odes. Sidelining their presence in the poetic landscape is an historical error. This claim has been substantiated by the discussion of the four poems by the poets. To end, this paper, a modest attempt, demonstrates a case that female writers in no way were weaker in continuing the ethos and the ambitions of the Romantic period.

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