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appropriations

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Contents

Treatment of Criminality in Wilkie Collins's <i>The Woman in White</i> Anindita Bhaumik	11
Negative Capability: The Senior Romantics Struggle, Shakespeare Revels Anindya Sen	17
Fruits Advertised, Women Commodified: An Ecofeminist Interpretation of Christina Rossetti's <i>Goblin Market</i> Anwasha Sengupta	25
"If You Gather Thistles, Expect Prickles": Hergé's Portrayal of Power, Politics of Despotism and Dictatorial Regimes in <i>The Adventures of Tintin</i> Arindam Ghosh	35
Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's <i>Krishnacharitra</i> and Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose's <i>Obyakta: The Correlation between Science and Literature in two Nineteenth Century texts</i> Arpa Ghosh	48
A Traditional Spectacle in Adaptation: <i>Theyyam in Kaliyattam</i> C. G. Shyamala	58
"A Space of Their Own": Women and Spatial Politics in Elizabeth Gaskell's <i>Mary Barton, Cranford, and Wives and Daughters</i> Deblina Hazra	66
Of Marriage, Masculinity and a Gay in Negotiation: Mahesh Dattani's <i>Do the Needful</i> Gautam Sen	75
<i>Harbart: Ballad of a Memory-Soldier</i> Hindol Palit	84
Intersection of Public and Private Traumas in Amitav Ghosh's <i>Shadow Lines</i> Khan Touseef Osman	90
The Ambivalence of the Self and the Other in the Migrant Narrative of Kazuo Ishiguro's <i>A Pale View of Hills</i> Lakshmi A K	99
The reel bad Moors in Khalid Bekkaoui's <i>Lust's Dominion or the Lascivious Queen</i> Mohamed Belamghari	107

Fruits Advertised, Women Commodified: An Ecofeminist Interpretation of Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*

Anwasha Sengupta

The critical interpretations of Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* that have been advanced during the last two decades are nearly as multifarious as the goblin fruits so lavishly depicted in her verse. A cursory glance at the introduction to virtually any critical essay on *Goblin Market* provides a healthy catalog of the disparate readings of the poem: as commentary of the capitalist marketplace; as a tale of sexual, sometimes homoerotic yearning; as feminist glorification of sisterhood; and perhaps more often as Christian allegory of temptation and redemption (Grass 356).

Christina Rossetti's highly acclaimed poem *Goblin Market*, ostensibly a fairy-tale like nursery rhyme, has been analyzed through innumerable perspectives. Wide discussions have been made on the possibility of reading it as a poem that problematizes the binaries that defined Victorian femininity- 'angel' and 'fallen woman'. It has also been read as a miniature representation of the Bible-the woman succumbing to temptation and her consequent fall which is followed by her restoration instrumented by her Messiah sister. Critics have also interpreted it as an attestation to women's marginalization in the Victorian market economy. However, a close reading of the poem also makes the reader aware of another perspective that seems to be missing from thorough researches-the association between women and nature/ environment. The nature's exposure to masculine oppression and the definition of various natural elements in terms of femininity and vice versa give rise to the possibility of reading the poem from the Ecofeminist standpoint. This paper would attempt to explore the various tenets of Ecofeminism that are prevalent in the poem, underneath the plethora of other interpretations.

Ecofeminism is considerably a recent theory in the field of sociocultural studies. As an offshoot of feminism, it manifests the possibility of the affinity between woman and nature. Considering the various ways in which the Nature has been exposed to oppression, feminists have interpreted a close

connection between the victimization of women in a patriarchal establishment and the taming of Nature by the ravishing masculine hands. It can also be considered as a movement that seeks to protect Nature from human devastation and bears close alliance to the feminists' endeavor to emancipate the women from stringent patriarchy. Krech observes an intricate relationship between ecology and feminism, which gives way to the term Ecofeminism:

Ecofeminism has become an umbrella term for historical associations between women and nature, for studies of and resistance to domination as a mode of interhuman and human-Earth relations, for indepth understanding of patriarchal and social structures and worldviews, and for social movements that see the oppression of women and the domination of the natural world as connected. Ecofeminist theories reflect differently on the relationships between women and the natural world and between misogyny and ecological crisis (Krech 365)

The term Ecofeminism was conceived by the French feminist Francois d'Eaubonne in her work *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974). She interpreted that the exploitation of environment and other natural resources to give rise to a capitalist economy bears a close alliance with the various sexual politics that establish a gendered society wherein patriarchy subdues women. Val Plumwood in her celebrated work *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* says that masculinity and femininity are based on social constructions of 'dualized structure of otherness and negation' (Plumwood 42). The binary, disjunctive terms like nature/culture, woman/man, body/mind, weak/strong, animality/rationality, private/public and earth/heaven are thus the juxtapositions of concepts that involve a continuous play of power wherein the former is continually under the dominion of the latter concept. It is thus deciphered that the 'superior' man of the Westernized culture, carrier of patriarchy, is entitled to dominate and exert power over the weaker, docile nature, ravage her to satiate his rapacious instincts and make profit out of it in the capitalist economy, just as he imposes his power on the female body, rape her and sexually subjugate her. Greta Gaard coins the concept of 'sexualizing Nature' which reinforces the close connectivity between nature and female bodies and the susceptibility of both to masculine virility. Gaard adds that 'the liberation of women-the aim of all branches of feminism-cannot be fully affected without the liberation of nature; and conversely, the liberation of nature so ardently desired by environmentalists will not be fully affected without the liberation of women' (Gaard 137). The terms in which nature has been defined in the patriarchal language are solely related to her

productivity, like 'fertile', 'barren', 'sterile', 'virgin', 'productive', 'wild'; paradoxically these are the conventional terms to define female bodies. The patriarchal society has always preferred to look at women from a singular perspective-as a body. Simone de Beauvoir in her feminist masterpiece *The Second Sex* observes: 'Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female: this word is enough to define her' (Beauvoir 21). Nature, by its inherent productive capability, becomes the source to engender economic profit in the male-dominated market economy; masculine power has access on women's bodies as well as the capital of producing profit by making them prostitutes. The shared oppression of nature and women under patriarchy, male voyeurism thus makes enough ground to coalesce feminist studies in ecological perspectives.

Goblin Market, the backdrop of which is a market where superhuman goblin 'men' merchandize multifarious fruits, apparently seems to be a tale of two sisters-the outgoing, curious, vivacious and less cautious Laura and responsible, mature, wise and sagacious Lizzie. Located in the Victorian social setting and given the ample sexual innuendoes in the poem, Lizzie and Laura come under the judgement-making canon of 'angel' and 'fallen woman'. Apart from the depiction of these supernatural goblins, the two sisters and another Jeanie in the cautionary tale; the conspicuous presence of nature, implicit and explicit ravages on them, their continuous alliance with the sisters are never to be missed. The poem can be read as the microcosmic representation of biodiversity in the ecology-there are fruits 'fresh from the vine' as well as those 'wild-free-born', there is the image of a goblin man in a reptilian activity of crawling 'like a snail' and also of another in avian activity of cooing 'like voice of doves', allusion is made to a 'restless brook' and mention is made of 'rush-imbedded swan' or 'lily from the beck'. Strikingly, the catalogue of fruits is not presented by the narrator; they are advertised in the typical commercial way as done in a competitive market, where the merchants aim in alluring the consumers only to engender their own profit. The poem begins with a long list of heard and unheard-of exotic fruits, presented in sensuous terms-'sweet to tongue and sound to eye'-and immediately the fruits get reduced to mere female bodies. Grass notices:

The lists in *Goblin Market* constructs a vision of a bounteous and abundant nature that is seductive in its infinite variety-not a surprising vision considering Rossetti's love of the natural world around her (Grass 358).

Strikingly, the customary cry of the goblins begins not directly with the naming the fruits, but with the invitatory jingle 'Come buy' that is interspersed with the display of the fruits. The reiterating cry is then followed by the innumerable fruits, almost each described in bodily terms, reinforcing their similarities with the female physiognomy:

Come buy our orchard fruits,
Come buy, come buy:

Apples and quinces,
Lemons and oranges,
Plump unpecked cherries.
Melons and raspberries,
Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,
Swart-headed mulberries,
Wild-free-born cranberries,
Crab-apples, dewberries,
Pine-apples, blackberries,
Apricots, strawberries;--
All ripe together
In summer weather,-- (3-16)

The quince, not a new fruit but simply another variation of apple, is reminiscent of the term 'quincenera' that refers to a young girl as she reaches the fifteenth year of her life, hence reaching her puberty and maturing sexually into a woman. 'Plump', another physiological description, goes not as much with fruits as with the delineation of a voluptuous female body perceived by the male gaze. A fruit, a natural element, is thereby reduced to a sexual object, advertised in male-controlled language in male-monopolized capitalist market, to be enjoyed by the consumers. Unpecked is another word that is replete with sexual innuendo- the untouched cherry, not bitten by a bird or stung by an insect, implies a virgin woman. The pecking on the cherries is the symbolic representation of a woman experiencing the sexual penetration. The fruits are mostly unseasonal, hence it reinforces another significant concern of the ecofeminists-the use of scientific technologies to induce the productivity of the soil. The nature thus is sexualized and victimized; its productive efficiency is exploited for profit-making purpose in the male-oriented economy. Maria Mies, the acclaimed ecofeminist, coins the two terms 'matrilineality' and 'matrilocality' to signify the potentiality of procreation

and motherhood that constitute the essential being of nature as well as woman. The possibility of the eternal productivity of nature, naturally or artificially, drives home the ever-fertility of the female womb, facilitating the male sexuality to dominate it and impregnate it. The productivity of nature enables man to extend his economic profit at the cost of nature's misuse, the multiple pregnancies of a woman perpetuates patriarchy at the cost of woman's health. Mies thus says that the lack of control over woman's womb is an obstacle to her liberation from patriarchy:

Generative potency or wild fertility of the female body has, since the beginning of this century been identified as one of the handicaps for women's emancipation. In an effort to restrain this 'wild fertility', it has been fought with mechanical, chemical and biological devices or weapons, from contraceptives to sterilizations (Mies 138).

Nature too cannot evade the patriarchal oppression and is continually corroded, mishandled by man to produce more crops. This same 'wild fertility' of the female body was responsible for the social stigma on the Victorian women. Victorian fiction is replete with such unwed mothers, whose momentary injudicious actions of passion lead them to life-long humiliation and defilement while the fathers were exempted from the offence, mortification, disgrace and responsibility. The lack of knowledge of contraceptives or unavailability of sterilizations made the women unwantedly pregnant, and consequently they and their illegitimate children were marginalized. Thomas Hardy's *Tess*, Fanny and Sue, Dickens' *Esther Summerson* and *Estella*, George Eliot's *Hetty*, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* are such ladies who either succumbed to seduction or passion and resultantly conceived, leading to ostracization, stigmatization and even sometimes death at delivery.

'Wild-free-born cranberries' is a phrase imbued with implications. Literally, the goblins are referring to the cranberries that have been bred in wild lands, far away from human habitation and they are born naturally, without the inducement of fertilizers or breeding technologies or born in excessive amount. Yet, transcending the oversimplification of the wildness of the cranberries and the wilderness of the soil wherein they were produced, the phrase throws light on the matrix of Victorian femininity and motherhood. In the light of Ecofeminism, the wild cranberries can be read as wild, sexually promiscuous, virile women who preserve no qualms in her errant way of

gratifying her lust and rather seeks pleasure in the orgiastic sexual adventures outside marital liaison. 'Free-born' hence refers to the children born out of wedlock, the 'fruits' of free-love. What later became culpable for the procreation of these children was the 'wildness' of women, and the unfortunate children then ended up being in the custody zone of Poor Law and Parish Laws. Cranberries thus are the 'fruits' of unfeminine wildness and virility of nature/ soil who has germinated them in her womb-like receptacle. The men who have embedded the seeds have impregnated her, exploited her innocent virginity and vulnerable fertility and gain profit in the market out of it. Beauvoir's decipher of a strange connection between the agricultural tool 'plough' that man uses and the male phallus which says

[T]he day agriculture ceases to be an essentially magic operation and becomes creative labour, man finds himself to be a generative force; he lays claim to his children and his crops at the same time (Beauvoir 90)

reinforces the observation of Hazzlebrook in Warren's postulates on Ecofeminism:

[T]he phallic order is the source of a double threat to human being: overpopulation and the depletion of resources. Exploitation of female reproductive power has caused an excess of births, and hence, overpopulation; while an excess of production has exploited natural resources to the point of their destruction (Grazzlebrook 12).

The owners of the free-born cranberries, born at the cost of depletion of natural resources were the goblin men, who again sold them at market to gullible young girls, thus exploiting environment and women simultaneously. Mies opines that the wilderness of nature is alluring; it tempts men to exert their masculine force on them, their uncanny mystery itself is seductive:

Their relationship to the land, as to distant countries, is not a productive one. Instead they use up and consume this wild nature or the land as a commodity, or having consumed it they only leave a heap of waste, as they do when they consume other goods.... In spite of any fears of nature's wild, chaotic, threatening and destructive aspects, to experience the potential risks, the uncertainty of this very wildness is the fundamental motivation for this longing (Mies 140)

Another context that is implicated here is prostitution, a social problem

that commodified female bodies to generate economic profit as well as sensual pleasure for the men. Prostitution pervaded in the Victorian society, and many men under the veneer of respectability, visited the prostitutes, often leaving the impression of their masculine potency on the subjugated female bodies—the fertile wombs then germinated socially unacceptable 'free born' offsprings. The market where goblins are costermongers, calling the customers to 'come' and 'buy' the fruits is then symbolized as a brothel, the fruits are prostitutes, their bodies are advertised in seductive language like 'plump', 'juicy' luscious' to the potential clients and the goblins are none but pimps, extracting profit in a patriarchal capitalist market. Most of the fruits like 'crabapples', mulberries', 'damsons', 'bilberries', 'gooseberries' are not from orchards but from esoteric lands wherein the goblins have gone and plucked them. The orchards can be interpreted as domestic spheres or marital relationships and the exotic lands mean the world beyond domesticity, supposedly extramarital liaisons. The access of the goblin men to both suggests the sexual promiscuity and double standards of the Victorian masculine community, who in spite of the potential contagious sexually transmitted diseases visited the prostitutes. Men likewise find an indomitable attraction for wild lands despite the dreadful aspects and Mies' opinion in the abovementioned lines is a case in point.

The Goblin men call the consumers to 'taste them (the fruits) and try' and this is yet another dig at the femininity, humiliating the women. Considering the market as a symbolic brothel, the sexual services of the prostitutes (fruits) are economically monopolized by the pimp-goblinmen and even given chance for experimentation. The reiteration of 'come buy come buy' dilute the physical/nutritious value of the fruits and their diversity is reduced to their economic value. Ecofeminists assert that the ecological diversity instead of appreciated is consumed. Vandana Shiva, a reputed ecofeminist infers: 'Nature's diversity is seen as not intrinsically valuable in itself, its value is conferred only through economic exploitation for commercial gain (Shiva 164).

Laura initially shows reluctance to taste the fruits, afraid of the soil that fed 'their hungry, thirsty roots'. It might be the unconscious projection of her own carnal desire for the goblin sellers, as she soon loses all restraint expected from a Victorian virgin. The image of the 'hungry, thirsty roots' feeding the 'soil' might also be the symbolic representation of a sexual union—the virile man almost raping the vulnerable soil. Another striking analogy that is used almost like a leitmotif in *Goblin Market* is that between Nature

and the two sisters Lizzie and Laura, echoing the eternal connection between nature and woman. Lizzie's indomitable desire to taste the fruits of the goblins has been given comparisons with nature:

Laura stretched her gleaming neck
Like a rush imbedded swan,
Like a lily from the beck,
Like a moonlit poplar branch, (81-84)

....

The 'swan', 'lily' and 'moonlit poplar' show ecological diversity in the domain of flora, simultaneously projecting Laura's virginity. Laura succumbs to the temptation of the goblins and being penniless buys the fruits in lieu of a lock of her hair, at the cost of a drop of tear. Women in the Victorian market was not expected to carry money; Laura's orgiastic gorge over the goblin fruits hence symbolize her lapse, in Victorian patriarchal term she is now a fallen woman. Fruits have been advertised to extract monetary profit, a girl has been seduced to experience sexual pleasure-both drive home the shared exploitation of nature and woman in the hands of patriarchy.

The cautionary tale of Jeanie as a subtext in the poem, denoting the dos and don'ts for the Victorian virgins, again interconnects women with nature. Jeannie had transgressed the gender stereotypes, gave way to temptation, and

Then fell with the first snow,
While to this day no grass will grow,
Where she lies low. (157-159)

Jeannie, with her blasphemous act, had committed a sacrilege to femininity, got deprived from the holy entity of motherhood and died; she is compared to spoilt seeds that never sprout into blossoms. Shiva's utterance affirms this: 'Profane seed violates the integrity of ecological cycles and the relationships responsible for sustainable production at all [...] levels (Shiva 169)'.

Laura's temptation is accused by her trance and an anticipated degeneration as she longs for fruits, but once tasted she can find it nowhere. Lizzie now vows to revive her sister, walks to the goblin merchandisers with a penny, throwing down a gauntlet at the capitalism and wants to buy fruits. The men pound on her, harass her, 'scratch', 'pinch', 'kick', 'knock', 'maul' her for her 'proud', 'uncivil' reluctance to sell her body. This attack is a sheer image of a rape, a parallel to forceful ploughing on nature and natural

devastation. Susan Griffin says:

I had learnt that what motivates rape also motivates the destruction of ecological balance: the desire to dominate nature, to be in control. I also saw that the derogatory way in which men see women was a way of culture's derogatory view of matter, and that this derived from the philosophical separation between spirit and nature (Griffin 16).

The attitude of the goblins furnishes the dualisms that rest in the heart of Ecofeminism.

The closeness of the sisters at their hearth, away from the leering, queer, sly goblins has again been compared to natural objects:

Like two blossoms on one stem
Like two flakes of a new-fall'n snow,
Like two wands of ivory (189-191)

As it establishes the inextricable connections between the two sisters, almost like that of monozygotic twins; it also suggests the wholeness of undissected nature when it is untraded by male intervention. We can also decipher a spiritual connection between women and nature. Ecofeminists interpret that the woman-nature connection stands on two grounds-a social construction for the history of shared exploitation of both under patriarchy and a spiritual connection wherein women feel themselves connected to nature for their innate commonness. Judith observes: 'Despite the plurality of ecofeminist philosophies, there are two major strands of ecofeminist theory: the affinity or spiritual strand and the social construction strand (Smith 134).'

The poem ends with a positive, optimistic note, echoing the spontaneous spiritual woman-nature connection than an oppressive socially-constructed one. Nature is manifested to be happy-birds chirping, new buds blossoming, cup-like lilies blooming-each together make a whole nature that is unblemished, undestroyed, unplucked by men. Laura is free from her trance, vibrating youth, breathing sweet, with her eyes dancing light. Ecofeminism here is reaffirmed, women glittering in happiness can ignite peace and tranquility in nature.

All the references to the poem are from Christina Georgina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" from *Goblin Market and Other Poems*.

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