
Gendering the Greens: An Ecocritical / Ecofeminist Reading of Seamus Heaney's Works

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The very beginning of Genesis tells us that God created man in order to give him dominion over fish and fowl and all creatures. Of course, Genesis was written by a man, not a horse. There is no certainty that God actually did grant man dominion over other creatures. What seems more likely in fact is that man invented God to sanctify the dominion that he had usurped for himself over the cow and the horse. (Kundera, 286)

Ireland like India is a land of contradictions – the land where on the one hand women get eulogized as the Caitlín Ní Uallacháins¹ and on the other get stigmatized as debauched Magdalenas², just as in India where Bharat Mata³ is worshipped but where female foeticide and infanticide are social problems confronting an enormous section of the country. Cathleen or Kathleen, daughter of Houlihan, a mythical Irish figure, a woman, is emblematic of Ireland. She has been used in Irish literature as a symbol of Irish nationalism, most famously so by William Butler Yeats in his play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* where she has been depicted as an old woman, urging the young, virginal men of Ireland to defend her and fight for her rights and freedom.

1 Cathleen Ni Houlihan

2 Magdalenes, deviant, dubious women like Mary Magdalene, who sold their flesh for money

3 Mother India

Simultaneously, in the politically weak, fledgling Irish Free State one also saw the establishment of Magdalene Laundries – asylums which were functional in Ireland for as many as two hundred years; veritable prisons where women whom the Catholic Church and the State deemed “fallen” or “deviant” were incarcerated, often for life, in accordance with the Biblical story of Mary Magdalene, the first archetypal Fallen Woman who had to perform severe penance to wash away the sins of the flesh allegedly committed by her in the Judeo-Christian world. The pagan Gaelic tradition, as most pagan religions, was one that lived in conjunction with nature. Historians across the globe have seen the advent of Christianity as one of the predominant factors responsible in eliminating the sense of regard that man had for nature in its debilitating mission to wipe away all traits of paganism from earth and civilize the world. This paper offers an ecocritical / ecofeminist reading of select works by Seamus Heaney – it looks at the poetics and politics of the Irish landscape as depicted by the Nobel Laureate in those select works while commenting on them from the environmental and ecological point of view.

In an article published on March 10th 1967, ‘The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis’, Lynn White, Jr. asserted that the Judeo-Christian mandate expressed in Genesis played havoc with Man’s⁴ consciousness. It gave him absolute power to suppress and subdue the earth. He argues –

Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen. ... By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects. (1205)

4 “Man” (with an upper case M) in this paper alludes to mankind in general while “man” (with a lower case m) refers particularly to members of the male species.

Foregrounding this general mood I will commence this paper with the obvious – a formal definition of ecocriticism. Cheryll Glotfelty, the acknowledged founder of this field of study in USA, defines this still emergent theory thus, in her introductory note to *The Ecocritical Reader*–

What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective ... ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (xix)

Richard Kerridge suggests in *Writing the Environment*–

The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations whenever they appear, to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part-concealed, in a great many cultural spaces. Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis. (5)

A cursory reading of these two definitions of ecocriticism will inform, even the most uninitiated reader, of the definitions pointing to two different approaches that this branch of study follows. The second definition as Greg Garrad puts it in his seminal work, *Ecocriticism*, is more “British”. This leads us to the essential difference between the two varied approaches to ecological studies. In America, the term used for this field of study is ‘Ecocriticism’; in UK it is ‘Green Studies’. Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory* mentions an inherent difference between these two approaches –

There is perhaps a tendency for the American writing to be ‘celebratory’ in tone (occasionally degenerating into what harder-left critics disparagingly call ‘tree-hugging’), whereas

the British variant tends to be more ‘minatory’, that is, it seeks to warn us of environmental threats emanating from governmental, industrial, commercial, and neo-colonial forces⁵. (242)

Man has tried to dominate nature and the consequences of it are apocalyptic. “Domination is one of our century’s most fruitful concepts for understanding human-human and human-nature relationships” (Merchant, 1). Carolyn Merchant’s is an ecocritical perspective of the present day situation. Francoise d’Eaubonne offers an ecofeminist reading of this tendency to dominate –

The earth, symbol and former preserve of the Great Mothers, has had a harder life and has resisted longer [than women]; today, her conqueror has reduced her to agony. This is the price of phallocracy. (d’Eaubonne, 188)

Heaney too imagines his troubled, turbulent Irish land as a woman –

a woman of old wet leaves,
rush-bands and thatcher’s scallops,
stooked loosely, her breasts an open –work
of new straw and harvest bows.

Gazing out past
the shifting hares. (48)

This poem, ‘Land’, from Heaney’s third anthology, *Wintering Out* (1972), deals with the uncertainties of exile looming large on the poet’s young self. Written between 1969 to 1971, at a time when Heaney was away from Northern Ireland, on a sabbatical in the University of California, Berkley, the poem deals with the anxiety of leaving behind one’s land. The land has been represented as feminine and Heaney writes –

5 In my paper, when I talk of Ecocriticism, I adopt a holistic attitude towards the study of the relationship between literature and nature, and include both the American and British approaches of looking at ecological studies.

I composed habits for those acres
so that my last look would be
neither gluttonous nor starved. (48)

The innuendo is unmistakable. It is man's wanton hunger that has made this world unsafe for women; it is Man's endless craving that has led him to rape the land that nourishes and nurtures him. Heaney, categorically referring to the uncomfortable, ubiquitous male gaze, mentions that while readying himself to leave his home, he would not look back at his land with a longing that could result in annihilation of the landscape.

In 'Act of Union' Heaney presents the metaphor of the land as a defenseless woman more poignantly than in anything that he composed before or after. Heaney writes –

I caress
The heaving province where our past has grown.
I am the tall kingdom over your shoulder
That you would neither cajole nor ignore.
Conquest is a lie. I grow older
Conceding your half-independent shore
Within whose borders now my legacy
Culminates inexorably. (127)

Clearly, this is the voice of England – a male speaker, addressing Ireland. England is the "tall kingdom" (127) looking down on the woman that Ireland has been represented as, from "over her shoulder" (127). The "aloofness of the narratorial voice" (143) that Michael Parker talks about is suggestive of Ireland being the quiet victim of rape, by the traditionally powerful England –

I am still imperially
Male, leaving you with pain ... (Heaney, 127)

Josep Armengol, in his essay 'Gendering the Irish Land: Seamus

Heaney's 'Act of Union' (1975)', sees this portrayal by Heaney of England raping Ireland as a part of a long tradition in Irish poetry – the *aisling* tradition. Armengol describes the tradition thus –

Two main features characterize the eighteenth-century *aisling* tradition of Irish national(ist) poetry: the personification of “Ireland” as a defenceless woman and the image of England as her rapist. (7)

However, Armengol mentions that Heaney moves away from this tradition to the extent that he mentions in his poem the consequence of this act of raping the woman – traditionally *aisling* poets stopped at only describing the actual physical act. Heaney on the other hand clearly stresses on the result of such an action –

The act sprouted an obstinate fifth column ... (127)

This “obstinate” (Heaney, 127), “parasitical and ignorant” (Heaney, 127) offspring, according to Parker refers to the birth of trouble in Northern Ireland as a consequence of the conflict between Protestants and Catholics. This poem, Parker suggests, was conceived during Heaney's wife's third pregnancy – he wanted to celebrate her “human geography” (142) while simultaneously acknowledging his “male clumsiness” (143). The poem, originally composed as ‘A New Life’, of course in the changed form changes direction and turns completely pessimistic in the end. Heaney's authorial voice combines with the imagined English narratorial voice to predict for Ireland an endlessly doomed, chaotic future –

No treaty
I foresee will salve completely your tracked
And stretchmarked body, the big pain
That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again. (Heaney, 128)

It must be noted that in this poem the only voice that we hear is that of England's. Ireland remains quiet as she is “shamefully raped by a

very masculine England” (Armengol, 18). The strict binary division that Ireland has of women in its psyche – a point with which I began this paper – needs to be highlighted again. Heaney’s portrayal of Ireland is interesting. Ireland by remaining silent in this poem conforms to the image that the Irish have of women – they are seen less as people of flesh-and-blood with human wants and human desires and more as mythical creatures, traditionally feminine, long suffering. The Irish Free State, where people grew up with such unidimensional notions of femininity naturally could not come to terms with female sexuality, and they imagined the female body only in abstract terms, thus leading to the establishment of innumerable Magdalene Laundries throughout the country, where women who deviated from this strange, mythologized picture of the feminine and femininity were imprisoned and made to suffer for what the male, moralistic Irish State in conjunction with the dominant Roman Catholic Church considered “crimes of the flesh”.

Heaney continues writing in this aising tradition, deriving from it and reworking it, in other poems too. ‘Bog Queen’ was based on a real archaeological finding – that of “the first properly documented body ever taken from a bog”, writes Corcoran⁶, “that of the ‘queen’ discovered on the Moira estate, about twenty miles south of Belfast, in 1781”⁷. The feminization of the Irish boglands, the association that Heaney establishes between the female body and the Irish land is remarkable –

I lay waiting
between turf-face and demesne wall,
...
My body was braille
for the creeping influences:

6 As quoted in Armengol (p. 19)

7 Corcoran, as quoted in Armengol (p. 19)

dawn suns groped over my head
and cooled at my feet,

through my fabrics and skins
the seeps of winter
digested me,
the illiterate roots

pondered and died
in the cavings
of stomach and socket.
I lay waiting

on the gravel bottom,
my brain darkening.

...
My skull hibernated
in the wet nest of my hair.

Which they robbed.
I was barbered
and stripped
by a turfcutter's spade

who veiled me again
and packed coomb softly
between the stone jambs
at my head and my feet.

Till a peer's wife bribed him.
The plait of my hair

...

and I rose from the dark,
hacked bone, skull-ware,
frayed stitches, tufts,
small gleams on the bank. (112 - 114)

In ‘Act of Union’ while we heard England’s voice, here we possibly hear Mother Ireland speak, a figure almost like the legendary Kathleen ni Houlihan. Through the sustained analogy of the female body and the bogland, the implication that Mother Ireland will “rise from the dark” and avenge the wrongs that an exploitative England has done to her is evident. The description of course is “imbued with sexual undertones” (Armengol, 20).

Other “bog poems” by Heaney like ‘Strange Fruit’, ‘Bone Dreams’ and ‘Punishment’ continue to feed the image of Ireland as feminine, a bog woman, perhaps. ‘Punishment’ is about the discovery from the bogland the body of a young Irish girl who had been brutally punished and killed by the Irish Republican Army for going out with a British soldier. These amorous gestures seen by the IRA as acts of betrayal did not go unpunished, historically. What’s particularly notable about the poem is Heaney’s almost patronizing authorial voice –

I can feel the tug
of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front.
It blows her nipples
to amber beads,
it shakes the frail rigging
of her ribs.
I can see her drowned
body in the bog,
...

her shaved head
like a stubble of black corn,
her blindfold a soiled bandage,
her noose a ring
to store
the memories of love.
Little adulteress,
before they punished you
you were flaxen-haired,
undernourished, and your
tar-black face was beautiful.
My poor scapegoat,
I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.
I am the artful voyeur
...
I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings,
who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge. (117 – 118)

Heaney relates sexuality to nationalist politics. While he feels pity for the young girl and the treatment meted out to her, he can also “understand” (118) the feeling of “tribal, intimate revenge” (118) that must have led the IRA to punish the girl. Heaney’s poetic sensibilities guide him to be conscious and sympathetic to the feelings of all parties involved instead of taking parochial stands or sides. Parker

writes—

Acutely distressed by the humiliations inflicted upon the ‘scapegoat’ victims of communal intolerance, he nevertheless recognizes the legitimacy of the community’s feelings of betrayal. (137)

However, “understanding” does not necessarily mean condoning. The vocabulary employed by Heaney to describe the girl almost exonerates her of her “crimes” – “little adulteress”, “frail”, “flax-haired”, “undernourished”, “poor scapegoat” and “beautiful”. The feeling of revulsion towards the poet aroused by his exceedingly condescending words “I almost love you” (118) are challenged the moment we realize that Heaney is possibly condemning himself for having been a mute bystander and not actively preventing the act from taking place – “I am the artful voyeur” (118). The fact that he did not intervene to save the girl, but “stood dumb when [her] betraying sisters ... wept by the railings” (118), was almost akin to the brutality meted out to the young scapegoat by the IRA – theirs were actual, physical stones of penalty; Heaney’s were the metaphorical “stones of silence”. Heaney, as an artist, had probably silently witnessed the girl being tortured because he wanted to exploit her body and situation and wean poetry out of it. Would a woman do the same and wean poetry out of similar situation, one might ask. The answer will obviously be a matter of conjecture. Heaney’s self-reproach at his complicity is something that we will choose to acknowledge depending on how critical we are of Heaney in particular and the role of Art in general.

When looking at Heaney’s representation of women or the representation of the Irish landscape as feminine one needs to focus on two other clusters of poems – constellations not as bright as some of the works that this paper commented on earlier, but important

nonetheless. ‘Limbo’ and ‘Bye-Child’ are two such poems which need to be probed into. ‘Limbo’ typically refers to the zone between hell and heaven in Catholic theology – an infant who dies before being baptized cannot go to heaven but the child should not also be made to suffer in hell because he had no hand over his untimely death – the infant’s soul remains in limbo. Heaney’s poem is about a young Catholic mother in the Protestant dominated Northern Ireland (Ballyshannon) who drowns her illegitimate infant to death – the act was perhaps an attempt on her part to protect her reputation, but in the process she was also freeing her child of the stigma of bastardy that would haunt him for the rest of his life, if he had lived. The heartless act therefore needs to be seen also as a gesture of extreme love, no matter how warped –

But I’m sure
As she stood in the shallows
Ducking him tenderly

Till the frozen knobs of her wrists
Were dead as the gravel,
He was a minnow with hooks
Tearing her open. (75)

‘Bye-Child’ is about another mother who attempts to hide her sin by hiding the child in a hen-house. Michael Parker suggests –

Although at first sight ‘Limbo’ and ‘Bye-Child’ would appear to be concerned with private cruelties and guilt, these chilling tales can also be read as parables for the present state of Ireland and its moral paralysis. (112)

‘Mother of the Groom’, from another cluster of poems, in a Freudian way, talks of the mother of the groom recalling her son as a child, when he had played on her lap and she had bathed his glistening back.

Reminiscent of Paul and Mrs. Morrel's relationship from Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* the mother feels that her son slipped off her "soapy hold" (Heaney, 68) with the daughter-in-law coming into their family. The poem ominously ends with the mother predicting that the wedding ring would "ease off" (68) the bride's hand, just as soap had once eased off her grip on her son. The marriage, of course, does not last, as the next poem in the anthology (*Wintering Out*) informs us – 'Summer House'. The poem can be criticized for this unflattering portrayal of the mother; however, the work has to be commended because it is one of those rare instances in Heaney where the woman has been given a voice of her own, if not some definite agency. In 'Summer House' again Heaney quickly returns to the voice of the male narrator, taking stock of his life. He is undergoing midlife crisis, his marriage is falling apart. He wonders what led to this failure in obtaining familial bliss –

Was it wind off the dumps
or something in the heat

dogging us, the summer gone sour,
a fouled nest incubating somewhere?
Whose fault, I wondered ... (69)

He does not wish to acknowledge that he was solely to blame for the relationship turning sour. In fact, he even claims that he had tried to restore the lost harmony – however, that was not to be. And through all this, the woman's voice is conspicuously absent; she is only shown to be weeping, pitifully –

I hear her small lost weeping
through the hall, that bells and hoarsens
on my name, my name. (69)

The image of the envious, strong, almost malicious, vicious mother

and that of the pathetic, sobbing wife are hard to reconcile. But then such has been the conception of the Irish landscape too in Heaney's gamut – Mother Ireland is either a forever brooding presence, waiting her turn to rise and retaliate, or she is the silently suffering victim, with hardly a voice of her own. The binaries are indeed hard to reconcile.

In this paper it has been my attempt to make readers pause over the very physicality of Heaney's metaphoric presentation of Ireland in poem after poem. In his works frequently he has personified Ireland as a woman offering us avenues to read into these works from an eco-feminist perspective. Celtic paganism existed before Ireland got Christianized by St. Patrick and this was a time when the role of the woman could not be undermined. The significance of the woman in so far as her companionship and cooperation with kings and other heroes is concerned is sufficiently evinced in early Irish literature. The power of the woman gradually deteriorated with the rise of the Catholic Church that tried to control women and tame the earth simultaneously. The immensely patriarchal attitude promoted by the Vatican for centuries led to the denigration of the woman from that of a *tour de force* to simply perhaps a temptress. The real identity of Mary Magdalene, the Jewish woman associated with the name of Jesus, has been a subject of debate for over twenty centuries. Magdalene most commonly has been dismissed as a prostitute – a reformed prostitute is the maximum benefit of doubt that religious clerics are willing to give her. She was represented popularly as a seductress, a sinner, a whore, her voluptuous breasts revealed for all to see. However, the discovery of some papyrus documents by certain unsuspecting Egyptian farmers inside a sealed, buried urn in the nineteenth century led to an entirely new dimension in Biblical studies. What was unearthed from that urn in Egypt was a manuscript on papyrus called 'The Gospel of Mary', which wholly redefines

Mary Magdalene's identity. The town whore is seen in a completely new light here – as a leader of the apostles, a devoted follower of Christ. This discovery offers us an alternative reading of Mary, differing from the one sold by the Vatican for around 1500 years. However, even before this path-breaking excavation Mary had occupied a position of sufficient centrality in the New Testament. She is said to have been the first person to witness Christ's Resurrection; she was the first person to have reported it to Christ's apostles. This unique appearance to Mary Magdalene, according to Professor Carolyn Osiek, a Christian theologian, gives her a status, it gives her an importance. Nevertheless, allegations of prostitution and adultery led to Mary Magdalene's reputation being tarnished for hundreds of years. The Church's deliberate and continued 'campaign' against Mary Magdalene, despite evidence showing Magdalene in a light far more positive than the Church was willing to give her credit for, is indicative of the puritanical, sectarian mindset of those who promised to preach the word of God. Not only had these men shrewdly usurped the rights of women and successfully undertaken devastatingly exploitative projects which led to the ruin of Mother Nature and Earth completely, but they also ensured that the figure of God, when translated to the common man, appeared as male and not female – their most astute strategy to not only take over others' rights but also to legitimize their cunning actions through the created image of God. The Derry-born Catholic poet, Heaney, throughout his life has battled against such conniving, totalizing attitudes. A poet of heightened sensibilities, he has tried in his humble way to not associate himself with camp politics but to explore every aspect of a problem – to dig out the past in its entirety and present it to posterity. His poems, in troubled times like ours, demand and deserve a close reading therefore from perspectives which are hitherto new and unexampled.

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