

Crisis of Identity of Wordsworth's Lucy

Kishalaya Podder

Research Scholar (M.Phil)

Department Of English, University Of Kalyani
Nadia, West Bengal, India

Abstract

Romantic period is one of the most important and productive ages of English literature. From the late eighteenth century people were thinking differently from the Elizabethan era. In that time people were more interested in liberty, emancipation, sensuality on beauty, wisdom, revolt than Elizabethan dream, wonder, exploration, heroism. Fondness for nature, humanism, spiritualism, beauty, idealism dominated romantic literature. Edward Albert called the period 'Return to nature' as nature was the chief guiding principle of any intellectual thinking of that time. Different form of human mind including childhood was the matter of literary discussion. To someone it was the state of mind or to others it was a special period of human lifetime. Scholarly and rationalized view of childhood was originated and aided by the conception of eminent thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke. Different *littérateur* like William Wordsworth, William Blake, S.T. Coleridge depicted their view on childhood in different ways in their writings. It was also the period of revolt for individual independence irrespective of any class, gender. My intention in this paper is to illustrate the irony of William Wordsworth behind his treatment of childhood and femininity in "Lucy Poems".

Key Words: Childhood, Gender, Identity, Innocence, Nature.

Since Simone de Beauvoir said in her "The Second Sex" (1949) that 'One is not born a woman, one becomes one', gender studies became one of the most vital literary and social discourses of the twentieth century. But there is stable or particular definition of gender, i.e. masculinity or femininity till now. Society for all the time bestowed the features of a particular gender identity to both male and female. Literature is such a genre of arts where gender studies is relevant for all the period. So, Romantic period of English literature is a well

discussing point in this regard in which male-female relationship was prominent in subject matter. Mary Wollstonecraft's 'A vindication for the right of women' (1792) was the centre point of such a studies. Officially romantic movement of English literature was started with the publication of 'Lyrical Ballads' (1798) jointly by William Wordsworth and his most fruitful literary friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This masterpiece had changed all the traditional attitude of that period. This 'Magna Carta' of romantic literature

contained “Lucy Poems”, one of the greatest love lyric of ‘Nature Lover’ poet William Wordsworth. So many discussions are already done about the nature of love of the poet. But my intention is not Wordsworth’s love towards nature, but the hidden irony that was concealed in his love and affection for Lucy, the protagonist of the poem series. I want to discuss the identical condition of Lucy based on eighteenth century patriarchal discourse on the domination of women. In this love poems, Lucy lost both of her identity as a child and as a girl.

“Lucy Poem” is a container of five poems like “Strange fits of passion have I known”, “She dwelt among the untrodden ways”, “I travelled among unknown men”, “Three years she grew in sun and shower”, “A Slumber did my spirit seal” though the first one was published earlier. There is a long controversy among the scholars, who is Lucy? They attempted to find the social identity of Lucy whether she is Dorothy, sister of Wordsworth or Mary Hutchinson, his lady love. Such kind of demand made Lucy the ‘relational property’ of Wordsworth. However, they denied the gendered or personal identity of Lucy. Thus she is confined with her creator Wordsworth. The motif of writing those poems was to lament the death of poetic muse and to show the glorification of death as an eternal part of natural cycle. To satisfy such demand of the poet lover Lucy became a natural ‘Object’ losing all her living, childish, sexual identities. She is idealized in poetic love. Her role is modified in due course of the poem according to the wish of the poet where she is a wooden puppet who does any role according to the ‘electrical signal’ which is the so called naturalization here. However her only natural existence in the poems is of being dead and nothing else.

First Lucy’s identity as a child is to be discussed where Wordsworth’s attitude towards childhood is reflected. William Blake is the most

renowned poet of romantic literature dealing the childhood. He depicted the glory of infancy and the calamity of upcoming maturity in his “Songs of Innocence” (1789), and “Songs of Experience” (1794). But Wordsworth’s attitude is somewhere different. He is not feared about the passing of infancy and the hurdles of maturity or ‘experience’. He warmly welcomed the ‘experienced knowledge’ and thus he thought unless we can overcome our childish ignorance, we can not attain pure knowledge of grown up stage. So he did not attempt to regain childhood. The innocence is lost with maturity and philosophical adulthood took up his mind. His “Tintern Abbey” is a fine example in this regard. Moreover, his attitude towards little Lucy is cynical. She had no innocent liberty in her childhood and all of her privileges should be enjoyed under the guardianship of ‘Nature- Mother’ and its surveillance. In “Lucy Poems” this ‘Natural Guardianship’ is glorified by Wordsworth but the innocence of Lucy would be glorified if it was written by Blake. As a result Lucy would not be grown up in normal way, but in ‘natural gazing’. So in the poem “Three years she grew in sun and shower” the poet gave the description in which this three years old child will be governed by the ‘experienced eyes’ of nature. He said-

“This child I to myself will take
She shall be mine, and I will make
A Lady of my own.”

Here is the superb irony where a child is a personal property of nature where her infancy is snatched forcefully. Later the poet compared Lucy with fawn (child of deer) that remind us the case of “The Lamb” of Blake in which there is no difference of simplicity between a human and animal child. Both are the sweetest creation of the Almighty. But in Lucy Poems, nature

sometime takes the figure of “Tyger” of Blake to whom there is no meaning of infancy, simplicity. Michel Foucault, eminent thinker and critic discussed the relationship between a child and onlookers. He said-“The body of the child, under surveillance, surrounded in this cradle, his beds and his room by an entire watch of parents, nurses, servants, doctors.....another local center of power knowledge (The History of Sexuality)”. From that point the gendered role of a child is determined by his or her social or biological relatives. This baby can’t do naturally as per wish. The body of bodily behavior is determined by that ‘guardianship’. So an infant mind is under the gazing of adults. This body of the child is a matter of discourse in the time to time growing up stages. The same is occurred in the case of Lucy where her child mind is controlled by nature, that is the romantic nature of abuse. According to critic Bruhn, the cause of Lucy’s premature death in this poem is that Wordsworth treated death of childhood as an important event for the growing up child mind. Here we may refer the view of C.M. Bowra about ‘Innocence’ of Blake that is also relevant here. He thought that the innocence pretensions, attitude, play of children have different meanings to different aged persons, i.e. infant and old. Even this guardians attempt to restricts the childish play of their wards. It’s form, limitation, timing should be under their control. So he said-“When experience destroys the state of childlike innocence, it puts many destructive forces in its place.....It views play as a squandering away of time and implies that man’s life “is a sham passed in darkness and cold”.

The identity of Lucy should be discussed on the ground of gender. The romantic view of society determined the gender role. It is typical that maleness means aggression, girlish means emotional, sensitive, passive. Society deserved this ‘Secondary Status’ of women. Women have

no right on their body that is privileged by the men who can mould it according to their own need. It is the duty of the women to maintain the bodily fitness or beauty to satisfy the need. So there is a strong gender politics in female sexuality. It is nevertheless to say that J.J. Rousseau was the supreme leader and philosopher of French revolution. There is a irony in the “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” slogan of Rousseau. He advocated for those principles to be circulated among men only. He thought male as ‘man or human’ who needed to be independent. His misogynistic attitude is reflected in ‘Emile’ that discriminated between man and women. His most negative views on women are discussed here. He said-“This principle being established, it follows that woman was specifically made to please man. If man ought to please her in turn, the necessity is less direct. His merit lies in his power; he pleases simply because he is strong. I grant you this is not the law of love; but it is the law of nature, which is older than love itself.” Aristotle possessed the same view who treated women as ‘deformed male’. He said-“We should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness”. So women have no voice, no identity except being the property of women. In the romantic period Mary Wollstonecraft is the first scholar who had shown the actual condition of women in front of the whole world and the so called ‘feminism’ was developed thus. In her masterpiece “A Vindication of the Rights of Women” she criticized the ‘male-favoured’ femininity of women (physical beauty, grace, softness, submission) that were demanded from them. She advocated for the equality of women in every aspect like men and they should live for their own interest and not for only the benefit of others. It does not mean that women should control men but at least they should have the right to control their body, mind, longings, ‘femininity’

that Lucy lost in “Lucy Poems”. Wollstonecraft said, “...**their minds are not in a healthy state**; for, **like the flowers** which are **planted** in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk.” Later John Stuart Mill also revolted in the parliament for the liberty of women because they are trapped in every social institution including marriage. They have no right even upon their children whom they have given birth after bearing in her womb for ten months. So it is the ‘universal custom’ to control women under patriarchy. In his “The Subjection” of Women (1869) he said, “Men do not want solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiments..... They have therefore put everything in practice to enslave their minds.” In the modern period in “A Room of one’s own” Virginia Woolf said that if women don’t have the minimum authority of their own in the very common pretensions like home, shelter, money it’s impossible for them to write fiction (to express themselves). Basically without having minimum ownership they have no identity at all, all belong to their male counterpart. She said, “**a woman must have money and a room of her own**”.

Let us discuss the Lucy poems of Wordsworth where the nature lover poet sang the saga of nature. Though Lucy is the protagonist, but the subject matter is not of her. It is the glorification of Wordsworth and nature. No one knows who is Lucy in reality, perhaps she is the imagination of the poet. Her body, gender, sex, grace all are created, modified by the imagination where she has nothing to do. Actually she is isolated, mysterious, anonymous figure having no particular identity. This is the stereotype view of eighteenth century that having a personal identity

of woman is too much. In “She dwelt among the untrodden ways” a Lucy poem, Wordsworth Said-

*She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove,
A Maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love:*

It is important that Lucy resides in an ‘untrodden’ place and it is not known to all. So she can’t contact to any one to express her inner state of mind. She is confined in a place of solidarity and caged in loneliness, lived alone. As the poet compared Lucy with violet and fair star of the sky, there is no doubt that Lucy is beautiful. But this beauty is ‘half-hidden’ from the eye that means the grace of Lucy is not for all. Her beauty is isolated from the external world that made her helpless. Here Lucy appeared as an abstract object of love having no livingness, desire, action. The value of her beauty is depended upon the praise she received by her poet lover. The words ‘springs of dove’ indicated the Dove cottage of Wordsworth that means he was among the very few who knew Lucy. It also depicted the personal possession of the poet upon Lucy. But the irony is that Lucy is unknown to others, no one is apparent to mourn at her death. So this death did not last any effect upon the nature except the poet. It means Lucy had no existence in the world except in the poet.

In another Lucy poem, “A Slumber did my Spirit Seal”, the poet said,

*A slumber did my spirit seal,
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel.
The touch of earthly years.
No motion has she now, no force;*

She neither hears nor sees;

This lines established Lucy as a 'thing' that could not feel like human being but an abstract and trivialized in some extent. Lucy is not here the representative of nature, but the poet called her 'my spirit' that is his male ego that Lucy belonged to him as an object of poetic muse. She had no voice, no motion, no force. Here we may mention the case of "My Last Duchess" of Victorian poet Robert Browning. Here the duke treated his wife (duchess) as his personal property and nothing else. All of her sort of feelings should be dedicated only to him, even she could not smile to any one. It's the male dominative ego of the duke who ordered to kill his wife for not paying ample attention to him. He said,

*"... Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together.*

Now we should return to Lucy, So what is Lucy actually? She is dead in favour of the lover poet. Lucy's dead body will be converted into rocks, stones and trees, object of nature. Here a girl is nothing but a stone or rock. In that process of naturalization a woman lost all of her personal belongings and is confined within the role of dead poetic muse where her death serves the most vital role to the poet. It seems as if Lucy was alive she would not be important to Wordsworth.

"Three Years she grew in sun and shower" is an prominent poem in the Lucy series which is a point of discussion on both feminine and juvenile concept. We have already discussed the education of nature of Rousseau that is found here as nature appeared as a guardian. So the poet makes the declaration-

**This Child I to myself will take;
She shall be mine, and I will make
A Lady of my own.**

As Wordsworth used the phrases like 'shall be mine', 'of my own', this is a sort of dominative ideology associated with education. Wordsworth called this 'guardianship' as 'law' and 'impulse' that will govern Lucy's body and mind. So the moral education will be done by the gazing (observing power) of nature. According to the feminist critics this power is the symbol of male domination that snatched all womanly body privileges from Lucy. Her body is not of her but someone who claimed her to be 'A lady of my own'. Here we may refer to the case of "The Second Sex". She said that from the birth the gender identity of a girl is determined by society and in course of time she became 'Other', her value is calculated upon the attractiveness of her body, not mind. All stages of sexual or physical development of her body is gazed by society. So her body is the object for others and she had no control upon her own body. She said, "The young girls feel that her body is getting away from her..... It frightened her to become flesh and show flesh." Even there is no romanticism in physical relation that is not for the satisfaction for the girl, but for the 'man'. From that point nature is the custodian of the growing up children, determining her sexual gender role. The role must be in favour of the so called 'Nature' (male gazer or male poet). Here the phrase 'I will make' attested the view that masculinity will make and use Lucy in their own purpose, here it may be the poetic inspiration of Wordsworth. Lucy has no right on her speech, voice, mind, wish, body, Her another typical gender role is given upon Lucy that she should have 'grace' and 'beauty', 'silence', 'calm' etc. John Locke, an eminent thinker thought that women's

maintenance of beauty should be a part of her education whereas he had given prominence to masculinity. Here Wordsworth in the guise of nature wanted forcefully the feminine grace of Lucy. She had no other purpose but satisfying the 'natural patriarchy' by her charm, delicacy. So the poet used Lucy as a 'breathing balm' where she is the 'provider' of calmness to her beloved poet. The male power decorated her body and mind for taking advantages on her. Actually this supremacy of men upon women is prevalent from the beginning of mankind as in Milton's "Paradise Lost", Book IV, there is a divine order- "Hee for God only, shee for God in him." However, in Lucy poems, this 'natural education' is a camouflage beneath which a psychological torture is being done upon little Lucy. Here beauty became a lust of patriarchy where the poet praised her quality of 'virgin bosom'. It is the typical misogynistic attitude towards women where her chastity is calculated by her virginity and taking the virginity is the glory of masculinity. Lucy is the victim of sexual politics where her bodily virginity is a source of so called 'poetic inspiration' of her lover. This sensualization indicated the sexual desire of the poet where Lucy's body is the sort of satisfaction. Similar situation is found in the poem of Blake's "Sick Rose" (Songs of Experience) where the rosy-little body is a medium of 'experienced' satisfaction. Blake said,

**"Has found out thy bed Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy."**

So this 'natural education' is nothing but an elusive way of making her submissive and 'service girl'. Wordsworth here romanticized this horrible fact of subjugation of a little girl. Here the love is intentional. Though in all poems, Lucy is insignificant in public life, she is the hidden flower

with out having any self- **consciousness**. She is not allowed to speak. We may compare the situation with modern conception of 'Subaltern' of Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak. Lucy is a subaltern whose voice is snatched. Neither the poet nor the nature intends to hear her 'message'. She is sexless that according to some critic is the frustration of Wordsworth caused from Hutchinson or Coleridge. So Lucy is voiceless only to express her creator's frustrations. Here critic Ross significantly said, "Lucy's voice is non-existent in the poem..... She is silenced with death." There is the only voice of 'I', the narrator poet. It's the satisfaction of masculinity by 'killing Lucy' and worshipping her as dead muse. Thus he dehumanized Lucy that shows the typical gender discrimination of men as human, women as 'other'. Critic Bruhn said, "Lucy's otherness is figured solely in her femininity..... an alternative, non-traditional identity." Wordsworth wanted a rapport with dead feminine goddess and so Lucy is a denatured persona whom the poet longed so far. Lucy's condition is like 'Women in Refrigerator' who is basically fridged. So it's not a tragedy at all but a trope. The poet was in search of a self-recognition in mourning for Lucy. So she should be fridged like heap of ice so that the poet can establish himself as an ideal beloved and mourner. In that mourning, there is no existence of Lucy, but of poet. Even in death she is isolated in nature that is annihilated by men. Here another point is to be noted, Lucy's anonymity of identity is common to the women of eighteenth century or romantic period. The women writers or poets of that time did not possess the courage to print their name as the author of their published works in the fear of being recognized as a woman poet or writer by the patriarchal society. So they published works anonymously or simply put a pseudonym or 'by a lady'. For example Fanny Burney, novelist of romantic era first published her novel 'Evelina'

anonymously and the authorship was revealed latter. This may be compared with the case of Lucy.

References

1. Bewell, Alan. *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment: Nature, Man and Society in the Experimental Poetry*. New Haven and London: U of Yale P, 1989. Print
2. Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. London: Penguin, 1979.
3. Jones, Vivien. *Women in the Eighteenth Century. Constructions of Femininity*. London: Routledge, 1990.
4. Page, Judith W. *Wordsworth and the Cultivation of Women*. California and London: U of California P, 1994. Print.
5. Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Émile, or On Education*. Trans. Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books, 1979.
6. Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Norton Critical Edition. Ed. Carol H. Poston. New York: Norton, 1988.
7. Sen, S. *William Wordsworth Selected Poems: A Critical Evaluation*. New Delhi: Unique Publishers, 2014.