



HILDA DOOLITTLE:

DECONSTRUCTED FEMININITIES IN *SEA GARDEN*



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ABSTRACT

Commonly known as H.D., Hilda Doolittle was an American modernist poet. Her style had the traces of modernism not just in terms of form but also in terms of content. Her use of images as an imagist poet makes her a modern “imagiste”. However, her distortion of classical or conventional notions of gender, femininity and sexuality adds another dimension to her being classified as a modern poet. H. D. is actually a modern feminist who strives hard to deconstruct the gendered stereotyping of sexes and reconstructs a new female figure who does not have much physical attraction but has the power to battle with the fierce forces of nature and therefore whose existence is meaningful. Instead of long passages that depended much upon form, H.D. chooses “direct treatment of the thing, whether subjective or objective” and she wants to use “no word that does not contribute to the presentation (Pound 3). Through use of concise images, H.D. well defends her feminist stance. This paper traces H.D.’s modern feminism in her three poems “Sea Rose”, “Sea Poppies” and “Sheltered Garden” from *Sea Garden* in which she beautifies what is not beautiful and disregards things usually accepted as beautiful.

KEYWORDS : Feminism, deconstruction, patriarchy, modernism, patriarchal codes

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

H.D.'s feminism is not a simple revolt against patriarchy and its codes. Her feminism exists so as to define woman not as the libidinal desire of the patriarch but as a self-sufficient being that can resist harsh forces against it and can survive having realized herself. This protest and "self-realization usually takes place through literature" (Baştan 177) using the means of language to deconstruct the ideology that defines man and women within the context of their genders. Thus, H.D. redefines feminism in her own fashion, particularly opposing Victorian ideal female who looks physically attractive and abides by the generally accepted norms of femininity. H.D. is also different from her male modern counterparts in that her "poems center on the consciousness of female speakers who simultaneously critique the nihilism of cultures imbued with masculinist values and find potential for healing in the presence of female deities"(Hollenberg 270)

As all of the several writers, poets and novelists of the 20th century, H.D. was also born into an atmosphere of chaos that had the irreversible traces of two great world wars. Quoting Keller and Miller, "modernist poetry in the United States developed in large part in a context of feminist and socialist political activism."(75). She was inevitably effected by this aura of activism that sought to create things new and different from what had existed before in a rebellious fashion.

With the end of World War I and the winning of suffrage in 1920, a backlash developed in the USA against both feminism and reform politics. The new generation of women was more interested in a psychological and lifestyle feminism of individual privileges and sexual reform than in broadly based legal and institutional change or a homosocial women's culture. Consequently, women coming of age in the 1920s had a different sense of themselves from those coming of age earlier in the century. Although H. D. is of precisely the same generation as Moore, even attending Bryn Mawr College for one year while Moore was there, her feminism prefigures that dominating the 1920s. (Keller and Miller 105)

H.D.'S feminist style can perhaps be best expressed through her real life that is full of sexual pathos. Dismayed and betrayed by her male counterparts, she chose to have lesbian affairs in which she thought there was an equal share of power. This was actually what she had always dreams of. As Duncan puts it too: "They (Pound, Williams, and H.D.) alone of their generation—and we must add D.H. Lawrence to their company—saw literature as a text of

the soul in its search for fulfillment in life.”(137). Literature served as a platform for H.D. to assert her deep revolt against the male dominated World, in which the female’s sound was lost, therefore unable to be heard.

To achieve this aim, namely to make the feminine sound be heard, H. D. creates a new space for the female, deconstructing the old one. Her way of creating this space to allow the woman to speak is closely related to nature. *Collected Poems* by H.D. depends much upon nature and shows us how the poet experiences the process of creating an independent and newly constructed female identity. Particularly suitable for my discussion here, *The Sea Garden* poems which were later put into the collection is a new feminist way of looking at nature.

Sea Garden, which is H.D.’s first book of verse and later published in *Collected Poems* is one of H.D.’s masterpieces in which she reinterprets the natural scenery within her feminist framework. She attacks on sexual categories and the traditional view of an ideal female. This garden is different from an ordinary garden because it is a place “where flowers are roughly treated with saltwater, gives them strength and allows them to have their own experiences- and as images to have their own meaning because no worn-out significations of hundred years of poetic usage are imposed on them.”(Samberger 182). Just as the images are used in a modernist fashion, H.D. imposes new dimensions also to womanhood. For example in “Sea Rose”, there is clear protest against conventional ideas of female beauty. On a literal level, there are two kinds of roses in the poem being compared to one another: one is the sea rose and the other is the conventional or the classical rose.

The harsh rose or the sea rose when compared to the classical domestic rose that symbolizes female beauty or female genitalia is more precious to the poet. The rose in the classical sense does not have much meaning. However, the sea rose goes through several ordeals of nature and can still go on to exist, but this time even stronger than before

Stunted, with small leaf,
you are flung on the sand,
you are lifted
in the crisp sand
that drives in the wind.(9-13)

Though the adjectives such as “caught, stunted, flung, lifted” used to describe the sea rose connote negativity and passivity, this sea rose still deserves being exalted. If we read these lines through a metaphorical perspective, the female symbolized by the harsh sea rose is vulnerable to destruction by the primordial, devastating forces in nature such as the wind and

the drift. However, the whole poem is centered on this female figure and praises this new female persona's being an outcast and her nonconformity to the standards of Victorian femininity. This new female figure is certainly "more precious" and its "acrid fragrance" is more desirable to the so called soft smell of the classical rose. Here, H.D. not only distorts the physical qualities of a conventional female but also redraws her sexual attractiveness.

A woman does not have to be physically neat and attractive for male suitors and first of all a woman is not a sexual object that has to serve men. Perhaps, here lies the most important aspect of H.D.'s feminism. She wants to save women from being regarded and seen solely as sexual beings to entertain men. Rather, what she claims is that women are strong characters that can overcome difficulties and therefore can achieve self-realization. It is better to become a different, free rose than being a rose subservient to men and exalted merely on account of physical qualities. Interestingly enough, H.D.'s focus on women's self-realization through a movement upward in her flower poems adds another dimension to her feminism. The new female becomes spiritually cleansed and elevated as in "you are lifted" and several other poems., . The *Sea Garden* poems explain the potency that is within a surrender to the process of sea-change (Gregory 141). The persona in this sea garden gains subjectivity through a process of spiritual suffering.

The garden is traditionally the place of consummation of love. In H.D.'S poems the garden is still the place of love, but love washed with salts. It is a sea garden, inimical to all but the most enduring. The sea represents here the harsh power of elemental life, to which the soul must open itself and by which it must be transformed or die. H.D. need not have known but probably did that sea/salt is arcane alchemical substance linked to mysterious bitterness and wisdom essential to spiritual life. (Gregory 140)

A similar discussion also goes on in the poem "Sea Poppies" in the same collection. H.D. loves strong sea flowers that can resist the harshness of salty sea water, pebbles and winds. This poem can also be read as a female figure that endures the harsh conditions of nature and is still alive. Moreover, this strong figure has the capacity to regenerate through its very seeds. These rich grains of the poppy are like a treasure and they will always go on to reassert themselves. This facet of the poem not only adds vitality and dynamism to H.D.'s poem but also exalts the underlying female figure by alluding to the unique trait of fertility or regeneration, which the male does not have.

Amber husk
fluted with gold,

fruit on the sand
marked with a rich grain,
treasure
spilled near the shrub-pines
to bleach on the boulders: (1-7)

The selection of adjectives “gold, rich” used to describe the sea poppy shows the value the poet gives to regenerative ability of the plant. As noted above, this is a unique feminine ability and only this is enough for a feminist poet to assume the female as a “deity” that has the potential to create even if “your stalk has caught root/among wet pebbles/and drift flung by the sea (8-10). The speaker then makes a comparison between the “bright leaf” of the sea poppy and the meadow.

Beautiful, wide-spread,
fire upon leaf,
what meadow yields
so fragrant a leaf
as your bright leaf?(13-17)

It is clear that H.D. opposes the values set by the male dominated urban society and therefore she turns back to nature where things are close their first forms, unspoiled by tenets of modern civilization. The poet handles flowers not in sheltered gardens but in their harsh, threatening natural settings where the flowers have to struggle in order to survive. The flowers in her *Sea Garden* are not as showy as the ones we are used to seeing. Rather, because they are wounded and prove that they went through the process of initiation-which is rather a male oriented process in Western discourse- their beauty is even priceless. According to Davies, “In these poems the flowers are often seen as passive in relation to the might of the sea, but this passivity is not a continuum with powerlessness, they do not flourish as they would in the protected garden, but they survive in the elemental and harsh seascape, and thus achieve a nobility, an autonomy which would not be realizable in the oppressive luxuriance of the garden.”(41).

In “Sheltered Garden”, the narrative of idealized femininity versus femininity in its elemental form still goes on. While the flowers of the sheltered garden may seem neat and attractive, they have not withstood difficulties. The flowers of the wild garden transgressing the boundaries are more charming for H.D.

For this beauty,
beauty without strength,

chokes out life.
I want wind to break,
scatter these pink-stalks,
snap off their spiced heads,
fling them about with dead leaves--
spread the paths with twigs,
limbs broken off,
trail great pine branches,
hurled from some far wood
right across the melon-patch,
break pear and quince--
leave half-trees, torn, twisted
but showing the fight was valiant.(40-54)

The sheltered garden provides its flowers with “beauty without strength”, whereas the wild garden which is a place of ultimate harshness is the place of production both in a literal and metaphorical sense. In this wild garden where H.D. escapes to find a shelter from the inherited Victorian ideals regarding aesthetic values and femininity, the chaos leads to gaining strength and being more robust.

In the poems analyzed in this study, H.D. as a feminist poet loads femininity with new and fruitful meanings. This act of loading can also be read as restoring the female to its original, natural form in which she controls and is controlled by nature, regenerates and is regenerated. The society and particularly the Victorian society devalues the female subjectivity by imposing gender roles upon her. Then, as we read in *Sea Garden* poems, H.D. establishes a close link between nature and the female. As a feminist poet, H.D. unfolds the hidden aspect of femininity, saving the “female” from the confinements of the modern society.

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