



Voiceless Muses: A Study of Social Voyeurism and Silences through Gender politics in Lyrical Poetry

Sukanya Mandal

Abstract

Romantic lyrical poetry centres itself on eulogizing a beloved, who—through a subtle process of dehumanization—has been deified and elevated to become the Muse or personified inspiration for the poet – one of the most popular practices in the hetero-normative poetic world. However, this idea of a Muse is further problematized when examined under the ethical purviews of power dynamics that divide the creator from the created. In other words, the socio-politically constructed gender roles that divide the poet and his Lady Love in the real world is given the same sanction even within the creative world of poetry, as the reception of the imagery of the Lady toggles along with the binary categories of the ‘eternal feminine’ or the ‘monster’.

In this context, the present paper aims to study the contrasting portrayals of silences and sensations added to female Muses by male poets and the delineation of male Muses designed by feminist writers. This would enable the paper to arrive at a re-appreciation and consequent recognition of the essential subjectivity of the poetic voice, as set forth in the various poems discussed within the breadth of this paper. This would help to question the blind acceptance of any poetic work as an unbiased, objective account of the person spoken of, and thus help acquire a new angle of interpreting romantic lyrical poetry.

Keywords: poet, muse, misreading, silence, subjectivity



René Descartes' noted philosophical proclamation about the intrinsic connection between the ability to think and the state of being, summed up in his own words 'Cogito, ergo sum', or "I Think therefore I Am".¹ In other words, Descartes' philosophical enquiry had put before the world that thought is the quintessence of existence and if there exists a thought, based on desire and need; expression or non-expression of it are naturally the only two possibilities to choose from. This paper therefore, aims to read how thinkers when trapped into socially constrained gender roles of the creator and the created Muse, or the poet and the beloved; the former gains power to read and often misread the languages, both verbal and non-verbal, of the socially silenced latter and pass them as authentic aphorisms or her natural thoughts.

'Lyric' from Greek 'lyrikos' via Latin 'lyricus'² was originally a public performance, where a song or speech was delivered to an unknown audience, so as to acquaint them with some highly personal concerns of the poet/speaker/philosopher. A speaker endowed with the power to influence, could always volte-face one into confiding in him, but the awareness of the subjectivity of the respective expression kept the audience unbiased about the subject's social image. However, gradually the critical reduction of the definition of lyric poetry to what James Stuart Mill calls "feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude",³ created a poet-centric lyrical world wherein the idea of 'confession' over-shadowed the awareness of subjectivity, thus plundering the power of the hearer. This speaker-ruled authorial universe so created a petrifying systematized tool of social oppression which ethically sanctioned the highly prejudiced master-slave power dynamics between a performer (author) and the audience (reader). Later in the 20th century, the importance of the reader's subjectivity is once again reclaimed by Structural and Post-Structural theorists, however very little was done towards de-staining the already mercilessly marred female identity of the muse.

The Muse as a source of creative inspiration had always been only a passive entity, with no control whatsoever, over the portrayal or utility of the inspiration provided by her. Hence as per the heteronormative gendered social roles, a quietened female had to play the absent presence of the Muse. Accordingly, she was both deified with sensation and vilified with mercilessness by a highly voyeuristic, rejected lover-boyish male poet. Etched in the beloved figure her silence, meekness and helplessness were beautified in the name of 'the eternal feminine', and her attempts to overcome this 'lakshmanrekha'⁴ were conveniently nullified by blatant disregard for both her intellectual capabilities and practical possibilities of holding an opinion. For instance, in the following lines from Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci':

I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She looked at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan.
I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long,

For sidelong would she bend, and sing
A faery's song.
She found me roots to relish sweet,

And honey wild, and manna-dew,
And sure in language strange she said-
'I love thee true'⁵

We observe how the poet very rapidly moves from “as she did love” to the surety of “I love thee true” with such unassailable confidence that he quotes her, though unable to comprehend her “strange language”.⁶ There is not even a single word assuring her commitment or any fruitful communications whatsoever. Rather, her moans, songs and kindness in offering food are ill-interpreted with assumed fallacies reflecting the poetic desire, which when not met she is transformed into a villain or a heartless monster. She is referred to as a *femme fatale*. It is perhaps in lieu of this voiceless-ness that we see later female writers portraying their characters or assigning speeches to them which deliberately challenge the patriarchal conventions. For instance, Austen’s Miss Bates in *Emma* was Malapropish, while the creature in Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* is born without a language.⁷

The Muse, therefore, in the phallogocentric world of the poet, is essentially transformed into a linguistic body of silences and gestures, pitilessly rejecting any amorous advances, and staying encased in a pristine, ‘virginal’ state, which allows her to be raised to the position of a deity. Furthermore, although the poet seemingly appears to compose his poetry only under the influence of the Muse, so much so, that the poet often presents himself as a scribe, merely scribbling whatever the Muse dictates him. Thus, in turn, the poem becomes a mere wording of the voice of the Muse, whose voice is given the avenue of poetry to reach the ears of common mortals. However, what is distinctly downplayed in this setup is that the voiceless-ness, owing to the unavailability of ‘languages’ is portrayed inversely as the very strength of the Muse and the very emblem of her divinity.

In his 1883 anthology, Eric S. Robertson makes a very interesting observation, where he writes that “women have always been inferior to men as writers of poetry; and they always will be.”⁸ He concludes that women’s biological capacities will always trump their creative abilities since “children are the best poems Providence meant women to produce.”⁹ Female authors were therefore imprisoned by their own womb, their ability to be mothers. Added to this were propositions like those of Robert Graves, such as “woman is not a poet: she is either a Muse or she is nothing.”¹⁰

Such misogynistic ideas were in fact, popular topics of contention, not only in the phallogocentric authorial world but also a subject of social controversy within the voyeuristic connotations associated with the muse. Obligated by an enforced passivity she was not allowed to feed words to her emotions or expressions. Her uncherished silences, ill-interpreted and misread through phallogocentric social filters, were congregated to write an ephemeral love story around the, apparently heartsick, forsaken poet’s self and a stone-hearted body of impressiveness in the muse, thus demonizing the latter’s very human existence. For instance, the first sonnet of Sir Phillip Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella* :

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That she dear she might take some pleasure of my pain,-
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know



Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain.¹¹

Sidney's sonnet also reverberates with the same delineation of the muse as pitiless; and is further carried forward to present her as a sadistic personality, who merely rejoices at someone's pain. Sidney's muse thus flamboyantly stands out particularly when the lack of certitude in the assumption is feebly introduced through a recurrence of the word 'might'. Nevertheless, it would be certainly unfair to blame Sidney alone for such a delineation of the Muse, when it can be observed in the greatest practitioner of the genre, namely Francesco Petrararch. In his collection of sonnets, called the *Canzonier*, dedicated to his Muse, named Laura, Petrarch after a jubilant declaration of his love and respect for the ideal woman, Laura, admits to her mercilessness and thus concludes if she could ever reciprocate to Petrarch's dedication, as "I do not know whether false or true".¹²

Undoubtedly, from an unbiased understanding of the poetic perspective, it might be conclusively drawn that the lack of an existent audible voice from the muse had to be compensated by visual reading of the muse's body that ultimately led to her voyeuristic projection. So Stella is hyper-visibly placed before the social eyes to be gazed at and Astrophil conveniently hides himself behind aesthetically deified but practically demonized Muse figures. This becomes further problematic with debarred gender fluidity in the roles of Astrophils and Stellas. The battle to fit into the 'eternal feminine' or 'muse' image that women were expected to, asked for dedicated training in the renunciation of all physical and instinctual essentials, be it her desire for pleasure, the voice of revolt or her ability to struggle for survival, and these infirmities being not the by-products but the penultimate aims of such pieces of training in renunciation added with the Lacanian psychoanalytic precepts of 'lack' infected the already phallogocentric authorial world to a degree where the 'poet' and the 'muse' became gender definite ideas. To counter such a binary division between the muse and the poet, contemporary feminist writers like Adrienne Riche introduced images of male muse in an attempt to infiltrate the possibilities of such creations. This is an excerpt from her poem 'Gabriel'

There are no angels yet
here comes an angel one
with a man's face young
shut-off the dark
side of the moon turning to me
and saying: I am the plumed
serpent the beast
with fangs of fire and a gentle
heart.
But he does not say that. His message
drenches his body
he'd want to kill me
for using words to name him.¹³

Her male muse looks beastly yet is an angel just like Petrarch's subhuman Laura, who is "whiter and colder than is a snow"; or Keats' monstrous Belle possessing "wild wild eyes". The male muse of Rich although resembles the silence of that is characteristic of the classical concept of the muse; yet this silence is perhaps more permissible and not imposed for she admits she has used words of her own to name him or uphold an image of him before the social eyes. Such readings meticulously point at how the muse is just one of the many selves of the person being portrayed without taking away his ability to revolt or "kill me."

The present advances in gender studies, therefore, in its adherence to the basic concepts of equity and equality, ask for a conscious re-realisation and consequent recognition of the poetic piece as a subjective body of poetic opinion and not the objective factual analysis of the muse, expecting it to re-assign the fluidity of power dynamics between the poet and the reader, thus relieving the female muse of her fiendish, *femme fatale* repute. Muses might still remain voiceless but an entire gender that constitutes almost half the world population should not.

Notes

¹ René Descartes had made this proclamation in his noted work, *Principia Philosophiæ*. The saying occurs in part I of the work.

² Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, ed.2 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010) p.52.

³ J. S. Mill, 'Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties.'

⁴ The 'Lakshman Rekha' is the most popular idiom to represent the limitations etched onto the behaviours of women in India. In the absence of Rama, his brother Lakshmana was given the duty of protecting Sita from any harm. As the arrow of Rama pierced the heart of Maaricha — the vassal of the demon king Ravana, who had been deployed in the disguise of a golden deer so as to lead out Rama out of his hut, so that Ravana could abduct Sita in retaliation for the mutilation of his sister, Surpanakha — the demon sent out a loud wail, mimicking the very voice of Rama. Disturbed by this wail, Sita implored Lakshmana to rush to the aid of his brother. However, before Lakshmana left the hamlet, he had inscribed a powerful magical boundary around the hamlet, so as to prevent any harm to come to his beloved sister-in-law. Utilising the absence of the two brothers, Ravana promptly appeared before Sita in the disguise of a sage and begged for alms. Since Ravana could not transcend the barrier of the magical boundary etched by Lakshmana — commonly called the 'Lakshmanrekha', the holiest of all boundaries — he repeatedly invoked Sita to cross over and provide him with alms. Sita could easily have chosen to stay within the prescribed limit of the hamlet, and let a poor soul go hungry; but she chose not to, and instead decided to step outside out of sheer kindness and humanity. However, the evil Ravana took advantage of Sita's humane attitude and successfully abducted her to Lanka. For decades patriarchy and religious leaders have chosen to highlight Sita's wilful overstepping of the boundary etched by her brother-in-law, but rarely it has been pointed out that she had done so not out of rebellious desire to flout norms, but out of kindness and humanity for a poor sage, alas who was Ravana in disguise.

⁵ Keats 1968, p.193.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Such an interpretation had been clearly highlighted by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their foundational work, *The Madwoman in The Attic*. Gilbert and Gubar take a completely different stand in analysing the novels of some of the Romantic and Victorian era female novelists to expose how their works had been an outright debunking of the major tropes and practices of patriarchy and patriarchal authors respectively.

⁸ Robertson 1883, p. xv. The introductory essay to the collection of critical essays centring on the English poetesses had been quite influential in the formation of the idea about the contributions made by the English poetesses, and yet how they remain somewhat obscured in comparison to the male poets of English literature.

⁹ Robertson, 1883, p. xiv.

¹⁰ Graves, 1948, p. 446.

¹¹ Sidney, 2020.

¹² Petrarch, 1999.

¹³ Rich, 1995.

Works Cited

Graves, Robert. *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar and Poetic Myth*. Creative Age Press, New York, 1948. p.446.

Keats, John. 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', *The Golden Treasury of Songs and Lyrics*, ed. F. T. Palgrave, New York: Oxford University Press, 1968. p.193.

Mill, J. S. 'Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties', *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, eds. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger. Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 2006. vol. I, 'Autobiography and Literary Essays', p.34.1

Petrarch, Francesco. *The Canzoniere, or, Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*. Indiana University Press, 1999.

René Descartes, *Principia Philosophiæ*. Ghent: apud Ludovicum Elzevirium, 1644. part 1, art.7.

Rich, Adrienne. "Gabriel" *Collected early poems: 1950-1970*. WW Norton & Company, 1995.

Robertson, 'Introduction'. *English Poetesses: A Series of Critical Biographies*. Cassell & Company Ltd., London 1883. pp. xiv-xv.

Sidney, Sir Phillip. "Loving in Truth". *Astrophil and Stella*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45152/astrophil-and-stella-1-loving-in-truth-and-fain-in-verse-my-love-to-show>. Accessed on November 17, 2020.