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A MOTHER AS AN OUTCAST: FELICIA HEMANS'S *INDIAN WOMAN'S DEATH SONG* AS A REVOLT AGAINST THE TRADITIONAL REPRESENTATION OF FEMININE ISSUES IN THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

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Abstract

Encapsulating a wide variety of approaches, Romanticism was triggered by such invaluable poets as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a harsh protest and revolt against the mechanical representation of life owing to the outcomes of the Age of Enlightenment. Though human experience was one of the core points of the Romantic Tradition, omission of female experience as well as the obstacles related to the patriarchal societies remained unsolved. Shedding light on female issues, Felicia Dorothea Hemans stands out among other poets and poetesses as a challenging one, for she both abuses the principles of Romanticism and subverts them in the best way, especially in her poem, *Indian Woman's Death Song*. Before analysing the poem, some traits of Romanticism, especially according to Wordsworth, will be elaborated on so as to get a better understanding of Hemans's argument about the feminine issues of the period. After the Wordsworthian definition of the Romantic Tradition, Hemans's poem will be analysed as a product of Romanticism so as to resist against the accustomed way of representing the female issues. The study, thus, aims to evince Hemans's success in benefiting from Romanticism in order to challenge it.

Keywords: Romantic Period, female representation, Felicia Hemans, *Indian Woman's Death Song*, patriarchal society.

PARYA GİBİ BİR ANNE: KADIN MESELELERİNİN ROMANTİK DÖNEMDEKİ GELENEKSEL TASVİRİNE KARŞI BİR BAŞKALDIRI ÖRNEĞİ OLARAK FELICIA HEMANS'IN *INDIAN WOMAN'S DEATH SONG* ADLI ŞİİRİ

Öz

Kendi içinde oldukça çeşitli yaklaşımlar barındıran Romantizm akımı, William Wordsworth ve Samuel Taylor Coleridge gibi oldukça kıymetli şairler tarafından Aydınlanma Çağının sonuçları sebebiyle hayatın mekanik bir şekilde tasvir edilmesine karşı şiddetli bir başkaldırı olarak ortaya atılmıştır. Bireysel deneyimleme Romantik geleneğin özünü oluşturan elementlerden birisi olmasına rağmen, hem dişil deneyimleme bir tarafa atılmış hem de ataerkil toplumlarca üretilen ve kadınlar için ciddi boyutlara ulaşan sorunlar çözümsüz bırakılmıştır. Kadın meseleleri üzerine ışık tutan Felicia Dorothea Hemans, özellikle *Indian*

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Woman's Death Song adlı şiirinde hem Romantik akımdan faydalanması hem de bu akımın prensiplerine en iyi şekilde meydan okuması ile diğer şairlerin arasından sıyrılmaktadır. Hemans'ın şiirini analiz etmeden önce, şairin bu dönemdeki kadın meseleleri ile ilgili görüşlerini daha iyi anlayabilmek adına özellikle Wordsworth'e göre Romantik akımın bazı özelliklerinden bahsedilecektir. Ardından, Romantik geleneğe ait bir eser olarak Hemans'ın şiiri kadın meselelerinin alışılagelmiş tasvirlerine karşı bir başkaldırı olması hasebiyle analiz edilecektir. Bu nedenle, bu çalışma Hemans'ın Romantik akıma meydan okumak adına bu gelenekten faydalanmasındaki başarısını ortaya koyabilmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Romantik Dönem, kadın tasviri, Felicia Hemans, *Indian Woman's Death Song*, ataerkil toplum.

Introduction

Circulating around the borders of Transcendentalism, Romanticism is a quest for finding the truth beyond the matter since the poets believe that art is yearning for the absolute and the absolute imposes itself on the material. However, it is also noteworthy that each poet has a different way of looking for the truth. Moreover, from time to time even the truth they look for depends on their perception of art. In accordance with the poet's understanding of the Romantic Tradition, the spirit or the soul is liable to transcend the limits by endeavouring to go beyond the matter. By doing so, however, the poet rejects the very existence of God in the Christian sense and adopts the idea of the absolute. As T. E. Hulme also suggests, "Romanticism is spilt religion" (1960: p. 118), which connotes the idea that Romanticism is a harsh revolt against a structured or an institutionalized religion. Thus, most of the poets of the time are unsurprisingly within the frames of Protestantism since "they all saw that they could have an important cultural impact by altering the character of the system of religion that was increasing its hold as the dominant ideology and idealism of the time" (Ryan, 2004: p. 7). Apart from the religious perspective in the Romantic Tradition, nature, too, holds a very large portion. It sometimes becomes the medium for finding the truth while for some poets it is also the place where the truth is hidden. Therefore, nature turns out to be another paradoxical phenomenon which is implemented into works of art in accordance with the ways of the poets. All these, however, are constructed and established by the male-dominant literary circles within the Romantic Era, thereby annihilating gender-related problems and issues as well as prioritizing the male issues in comparison with the female obstacles. As such is the case, it is possible to consider that Felicia Hemans challenges the romantic traditional representation of women by both abusing Romanticism and opposing to it, for she is regarded as one of the most professional poetess of the period. Moreover, her "references to male-authored traditions and texts could pay homage, or they could turn oppositional and ironic, reworking subjects from the perspective of women's lives, desires and dissatisfactions" (Wolfson, 2000: p. xvi – xvii). Therefore, her attempt of underlining the female segregation within the inherent culture and society due to man-made manacles is rather significant since the mother in *Indian Woman's Death Song* becomes the very embodiment of an outcast within the framework of the Romantic Tradition. This article, thus, aims to analyse Hemans's poem as a product of the Romantic Tradition in order to challenge the traditional representation of female issues by demonstrating and emphasizing the patriarchal manacles rather than consolidating them.

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Felicia Dorothea Hemans

Born in 1793 in Liverpool, Felicia Dorothea Hemans was brought up in Wales. "She began writing poetry, and published her first volume of poems by subscription when she was 14, in 1808" (Wu, 2012: p. 1290). As a poetess, Hemans was highly absorbed in such issues as the domestication of women, woes of women due to consequences of wars, deserted women, and so on. Because of her literary career as well as her thoughts about women and the patriarchy, she did not have an easy life, neither did she have a comfortable and happy marriage. Her husband, Captain Alfred Hemans, for instance, abandoned her when she was pregnant for the fifth baby because of her reactionary literary career as well as her reluctance in performing domestic issues and fulfilling the structurally and socially constructed roles of a housewife. According to an anecdote, presented in a note in the book, *A Short Sketch of the Life of Mrs. Hemans*, Captain Alfred Hemans "was once heard to declare, that 'it was the curse of having a literary wife that he could never get a pair of stockings mended'" (1835: p. 32). It was, however, not only Hemans's husband who acknowledged her so-called inadequacy as a housewife; Wordsworth, too, put forth that Hemans "was totally ignorant of housewifery and could as easily have managed the spear of Minerva as her needle" (Page, 2003: p. 125). Hemans, therefore, always has Minerva's spear metaphorically; her spear is her pen and it is through her pen that she avenges all her psychological breakdowns and societal impositions on her and on other women, for it is also possible to catch biographical elements in her poetry. Considering the institutionalized nature of the Romantic Tradition, it is also possible to claim that Hemans subverts the phallic property of the pen and makes it a woman's weapon in order to destroy the standardized nature of woman representation from the male gaze and observation. In this sense, Minerva turns out to be a very significant mythological reference since she is the emblem for wisdom and the goddess of war. In parallel with her painful and combative struggles, she highlighted "women as historical figures, as repositories of cultural values (heroines of "domestic affection"), as interpreters (herself included) of history and social structure, and (not the least) as perpetual victims of men's rivalries, political contentions, and wars" (Wolfson, 2000: p. xvii). This, for sure, is one of the reasons why there was a vast group of people including poets, who praised Hemans's works when she died in 1835 in Dublin.

Indian Woman's Death Song

The introductory notes – or better to state them as introductory lines for some poems – are common in the Romantic Tradition. Wordsworth employs such introductory bits of information as a principle in some of his poems, for he believes that the mind retrieves pleasure from the perception of "similitude in dissimilitude" (Wordsworth et. al, 2003: p. 20), which corresponds to the very notion that it is possible for the mind of the readers to perceive the meaning of the poem only if is it possible for them to sympathize with the conditions within the poems. Wordsworth argues this principle in the 1800 and 1802 editions of his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* as follows:

> This principle is the great spring of the activity of our minds, and their chief feeder. From this principle the direction of the sexual appetite, and all the passions connected with it, take their origin: it is the life of our ordinary

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> conversation; and upon the accuracy with which similitude in dissimilitude, and dissimilitude in similitude are perceived, depend our taste and our moral feelings (Wordsworth et. al, 2003: p. 20).

Considering these, it is possible to observe that Hemans starts her poem in accordance with the Wordsworthian Romantic Tradition since she, too, provides an introductory note to the readers as follows:

> An Indian woman, driven to despair by her husband's desertion of her for another wife, entered a canoe with her children, and rowed it down the Mississippi towards a cataract. Her voice was heard from the shore singing a mournful death-song, until overpowered by the sound of the waters in which she perished. The tale is related in Long's *Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River*[1] (Hemans, 2005: p. 901).

She implements the note in order to awaken a sort of empathy in the readers for the Indian woman and her daughter, for according to Wordsworthian principle,

> while [the poet] describes and imitates passions, his situation is altogether a slavish and mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering. So that it will be the wish of the Poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs; modifying only the language which is thus suggested to him, by a consideration that he describes for a particular purpose, that of giving pleasure (Wordsworth et. al., 2003: p. 14).

As a poetess in full sorrow, thus, Hemans aims to target her readers' hearts so that she can sound more credible and organic. She does not intend to tell only, but she also wants to be understood at all costs, which is possible through Wordsworthian principle of similitude in dissimilitude and identification with the unfamiliar.

Furthermore, because the woman commits suicide and also kills her baby daughter, Hemans also tries to justify her satanic action in the eyes of the readers. Apart from the introductory note, Hemans reflects the Indian mother's utmost desire as a woman, whose happiness has been stolen and who is not given any other option other than committing suicide, by quoting Madame de Stael's translation from Schiller's *Die Braut von Messina*: "Non, je ne puis vivre avec un coeur brisé. Il faut que je retrouve la joie, et que je m'unisse aux esprits libres de l'air" (Hemans, 2005: p. 901). According to Wu's translation, the quote

[1] The full name of the book is *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of the St. Peter's River, Lake Winnepeek, Lake of the Woods* and it includes a variety of geographical, geological, archaeological, agricultural and zoological information about the region during the exploration of the St. Peter's River, which is now known as Mississippi River. All information is provided through the close observations of William Hypolitus Keating (1799 – 1840), Stephen Harriman Long (1784 – 1864), and Lewis David von Schweinitz (1780 – 1834) under the command of Stephen H. Long.

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means "No, I can't live with a broken heart. I must retrieve my happiness, and be reunited with the spirits of the air" (2012: p. 1337). The spirits of the air or the realm where these spirits of the air are, therefore, become the ultimate place the Indian mother wants to be, for she believes that no one can hurt her or her baby there. The unification, moreover, is as a sort of going back to her roots, to the absolute, which is another feature of the Romantic Tradition.

One of the most remarkable notions is the fact that Hemans was deserted by her husband for another woman, which, correspondingly, made her psychological and economic condition more and more burdening. Therefore, it is possible to claim that the poem is an autobiographical one and Hemans "ennobles an act of violence, a form of conduct unsanctioned by English society, in order to valorize by proxy her own unspeakable desire" (Lundeen, 1998: p. 268). In other words, because Hemans cannot avenge her own stolen happiness in her own patriarchal society, she gives voice to an Indian woman and takes her revenge through her poem. As such, the readers are provided with an introduction which is full of gloomy and desperate feelings. The second quote Hemans employs, hence, is considerably assistive in establishing the romantic traits of the poem. "Let not my child be a girl, for very sad is the life of a woman" (Hemans, 2005: p. 901) is from James Fenimore Cooper's famous novel, *The Prairie*. As Wu suggests, the quote belongs to "the third wife of a Sioux chief who feels betrayed when she finds out that her husband is to marry a fourth wife" (2012: p. 1337). Sharing the same fate with the third wife in *The Prairie*, Hemans portrays the trivial position of women as wives in a male-dominated society. It is highly easy for a man to get as many wives as he likes; however, the conditions of the previous wives are obscure and there is no information or a clue about their future. It is not obvious if they live as women in a harem or if they are deserted eternally. This, however, is only about the physical standing of women; their psychological conditions are not considered as an important subject matter by the patriarchy. This is one of the issues that Hemans opposes to and criticizes strictly. In this poem, therefore, Hemans has a "Romantic hunger for transcendence, a version that purports to compensate women for their unpaid labor and the relative obscurity of their lives as nurturers and caregivers" (Harding, 1995: p. 139). Rather than being a passive, desperate and helpless woman, Hemans's Indian mother decides on her own fate and takes the law in her own hands as an active and living woman.

Nevertheless, what makes the beginning of the poem romantic is not only the introductory notes or the emotional meanings in the quotes above but also the fact that it starts with quotes and an introduction, which is not very conventional once compared to the literary traditions in the Age of Enlightenment. Apart from that, the selection of the woman's origin is also romantic since Hemans takes an Indian woman from the margins and puts her right into the centre. The central tendency is the classics' insistence upon a universal subject matter. Hemans, nonetheless, employs a marginal character within the poem and implements a shock that breaks the mainstream tendencies. This, for sure, is a very subversive attempt, which makes the poem a romantic one in return. After all, "an imaginative act of sympathy countered with an awareness of difference brings pleasure" (Hale, 2008: p. 108), which is also highly Wordsworthian.

Beside the introductory note, the quotations and the Indian woman, the first part of the poem is also romantic, for it stands as a narrative to the readers and gives them a scene and

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the background information for the rest of the poem. All in all, "[e]specially in her narrative poems, [Hemans] creates an authorial persona that clearly sympathizes with the poems' subjects" (Kelly, 2002: p. 29). By doing so, Hemans not only emphasizes the power of language but also gives an intense energy to the poem in order to make it more dramatic. Furthermore, the first part of the poem is highly symbolic and metaphorical. The first three lines, for instance, give a sharp and clear portrait of the patriarchal society and a woman's victory against the established norms: "DOWN a broad river of the western wilds, / Piercing thick forest glooms, a light canoe / Swept with the current" (Hemans, 2005: 1 – 3, p. 901). The broad river taking part in the western wilds, thus, stands for the journey, taken by the woman and her baby daughter in order to acquire liberation from the oppressing society, while the western wilds become the embodiment of the patriarchal society itself. The canoe, on the other hand, is a light one since it is a strong representation of the Indian woman's desperate psychological state. It does not go down the river in a controlled way; on the contrary, it is swept away with the current. Therefore, the Indian mother aims to leave behind all her desolation and depression stemming from the patriarchal burdens by surrendering to the end that the broad river has allocated to her. Apparently, she is great in pain due to her husband's immoral activity, for the Indian mother's "warrior's eye hath looked upon another's face" (Hemans, 2005: 20, p. 901). Furthermore, she takes her baby daughter, too, in order to protect her from the destiny, which awaits her in the future. This, on the whole, gives the notion that, according to Hemans, each woman is predestined to sufferings due to the male-dominated societies since the quotes she uses before starting her poem, too, are evidences of other women who suffer because of their own societies. As Kelly, too, suggest, Hemans employs such an end, which includes both suicide and infanticide, in order "to bring about a future liberating state" (2002: p. 28). She does not hesitate to kill her daughter, too, since she believes that her own fate as a deserted woman is not by chance, on the contrary, it is a "woman's weary lot" (Hemans, 2005: 36, p. 902). Constituted by all male-dominated values, it is the patriarchal society who is responsible for devastation of women. Therefore, the Indian mother takes her daughter to the death spirit's realm where "none are heard to weep, / And where th' unkind one hath no power again to trouble sleep; / And where the soul shall find its youth, as wakening from a dream" (Hemans, 2005: 40 – 42, p. 902). Hemans clearly names the masculine society as unkind people, exerting power over the female body and psyche, who, in the end, make them go through life-long troubles. Hence, "[i]n "Indian Woman's Death-Song," death appears to be little more than conveyance to a happier, safer place. Thus, the mother leaves the earth singing, as if art can transport her child and her into another world" (Lundeen, 1998: p. 267). The indifference of the man-oriented societies, thus, brings about a shift from the conventional representation of a mother as a helpless and overpowered one to a strong and decisive mother. This "shift … to a contemporary world of neglect and destruction emphasizes an idea that lurks beneath much of women's poetry in the nineteenth century—that life is a kind of death for the disenfranchised, powerless, or oppressed" (Ryan, 2008: p. 252). Though the Indian mother and her baby daughter die at the end of the poem, it is not due to the mother's weakness or owing to her helplessness; on the contrary, she is the decision mechanism of her own life and she contradicts with the idea of living as a dead body due to her oppressions. Therefore, she becomes the embodiment of strength itself and she prefers death.

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The first part of the poem is highly picturesque since it triggers the sensorial areas: "a tempest's wing" (Hemans, 2005: 4, p. 901) and "the mist of spray / [that] Rose with the cataract's thunder" (Hemans, 2005: 5 – 6, p. 901) contribute to the portrayal of the nature around, which, thanks to Heman's abuse of romantic features, awaken the perceptions of the readers. Apart from the picturesque representation, the consonance of '-s' is also significant since the sound is repeated in a very harsh tone, which, in the end, contributes to the harshness and bitterness of nature. Furthermore, it is also possible to acknowledge the Indian mother's fearful but brave and decisive mission since she stands within the canoe "Proudly, and dauntlessly, and all alone" (Hemans, 2005: 7, p. 901). She is proud and she is not scared of anything anymore, for, as aforementioned, she is now breaking her chains and she is also going to prevent her daughter from her predestination as a woman. Besides, death is the only way out for a woman to get rid of all her manacles in a male-dominated society. As Wolfson also puts it, "[g]ender was the haunt and main region of [Hemans's] song: she wrote of woman's social fate in a man's world, her sufferings and love-longings, her abandonments, desperate suicides and infanticides, her release only through death" (2000: p. xvii). This is why, then, "Upon her Indian brow / Sat a strange gladness, and her dark hair waved / As if triumphantly" (Hemans, 2005: 9 – 11, p. 901); she definitely avenges her stolen happiness and the already-established fates of all women. She does not follow the life, which is ascribed to her gender by the patriarchy; on the contrary, she challenges to the inherent way of life via her own and her baby daughter's death. Her death, however, is not due to her weakness; on the contrary, she is a very strong woman since she decides on her own future. Though her psychological status is not well and she is highly heartbroken, she overpowers the patriarchal society. All in all,

> [d]eath, in [Hemans's] poems, is not so much the enemy of domestic affection as the necessary dark backdrop against which the affections show their true brightness. At times, death virtually becomes a kind of guarantee of the significance of a life, particularly of a woman's life. The very pervasiveness of this ethos in Hemans's work, an ethos in which a woman's life is more worthy of memorializing the more it is played out against the backdrop of another's death and most especially if it finds its *own* highest realization in death, exposes to the modern reader the power of social expectation, of the social construction of gender" (Harding, 1995: p. 138 – 139).

Therefore, death is not an end, to the Indian mother; on the contrary, hers is a very strong emphasis on her ontological struggle. She cannot exist within a patriarchal society as an oppressed and disenfranchised woman; thus, she endeavours to exist as a woman by memorializing her death and putting the emphasis on it.

In the first stanza, the Indian mother's voice is presented to the readers. She is like a wounded animal, who is in search of its salvation and emancipation from the unbearable pains. Since "The weary bird that storms have tossed would seek the sunshine's calm, / And the deer that hath the arrow's hurt flies to the woods of balm" (Hemans, 2005: 18 – 19, p. 901), the Indian mother prefers surrendering to the arms of nature and chooses death. "Since the death instinct exists in the heart of everything that lives, since we suffer from trying to repress it, since everything that lives longs for rest, let us unfasten the ties that bind us to life,

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let us cultivate our death wish, let us develop it, water it like a plant, let it grow unhindered" (Ionesco, 1968: p. 56). Correspondingly, because of her unending suffering, she is like a commander to the river once she bids it as follows: "Roll swiftly to the spirit's land, thou mighty stream and free! / Father of ancient waters, roll, and bear our lives with thee" (Hemans, 2005: 16 – 17, p. 901)! When she and her daughter die, they will be liberated and all their sorrow will come to an end. After all, "[s]uffering and fear are born from the repression of the death wish" (Ionesco, 1968: p. 56). One of the most significant and remarkable features in the lines above, moreover, is Hemans's subversion of nature. Nature, to Romantic poets, has a female identity and it is correlated with life and flourishing beauty; however, as Wu quotes Hemans's note, 'father of ancient waters' is "[t]he Indian name for the Mississippi" (2012: p. 1337). By addressing the Mississippi as a father rather than a mother, therefore, Hemans gives it a male identity, thereby challenging to the Romantic representation of nature, too. Hemans also addresses to the same river as "Father of waves" (Hemans, 2005: 27, p. 901), thereby employing the same subversion. It is considerably well-calculated by the poetess since nature does not enliven now, on the contrary, it takes the mother and her daughter to their devastation, though the Indian mother thinks it is their salvation. As a consequence of this, the Indian mother and her daughter are abused both by the patriarchal order in their social lives and by the masculine nature during their journeys to their utmost ends.

Conclusion

Felicia Hemans both abuses the Romantic Tradition and challenges to its representation of nature as a feminine entity as well as emphasizing the gender issues by opposing to women representations in the Romantic period.

> Alternating with celebrations of the paradise of home and all its loves, Hemans limned the oppressions and devastations of domestic life. She wrote in an intensely personal way of socially specific conflicts: between being an artist and being a woman; between affection and ambition, between family and fame (Wolfson, 2000: p. xvii).

Furthermore, the Indian mother's so-called diabolic preference for committing suicide and infanticide does not actually stem from her weakness and fragility as a woman; on the contrary, it is a very sharp evidence of her protest to her physical and psychological exile within the patriarchal community she lives in. What makes the mother an outcast in the patriarchal society is the notion that she is not one of the stereotype women, who suffer everyday due to the manacles of the man-made values; antipathetically, she kills herself and her daughter in order not to be one of those sufferers. Transcending from the physical world to the spirit's realm, thus, embodies the strength and decisiveness of the outcast mother rather than her weakness and fragility. Hemans's poetry includes celebration of women activists, taking control of their lives in this or that way, elevation of female melancholy as a way of subverting the traditional expectations of the readers from a woman, and so on. Considering Hemans's notions, therefore, "in their imaginary investments, most nineteenth-century readers found ways to contain [Hemans's] challenges, ascribing the shadows to a hyper-susceptible



"female melancholy," or celebrating a "feminine" heroic of forbearance and patience, faith and martyrdom" (Wolfson, 2000: p. xvii).

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