

Representation of Female Subjugation in W.B. Yeats' *Leda and The Swan*

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of female personality in W.B. Yeats' Leda and the Swan. The current study shows that the female figure in the poem is subjugated because of male domination in terms of sexuality. The poem reflects the sex hierarchy of the contemporary time. Leda represents women forced to participate in sexual activity in patriarchy. She is objectified and swan as a metaphor of a hedonist man satisfies his lust. The major finding is that sexual objectification forces women to internalize that they are just for the use by men. Therefore, they remain passive as portrayed in the poem. The research has used the textual analysis as the research method and the rhetorical devices used in the poem are analyzed to explore the depiction of female status as predominant in the contemporary society of the United Kingdom. Leda is presented as a passive object to be brutally raped and desired. She is at the center of numerous conflicts. She directly struggles with Zeus. However, the poet has used Leda as a means for an understanding of the possibilities for transformation. Patriarchy serves as a cross-generational burden for the glorification of women as depicted in the poem. There has been a change in the sense that women had been treated equally and in a dignified manner in the ancient time. However, their status changed in the early modern era as implied in the poem.

Keywords: Zeus, Representation, Subjugation, Sexuality, Myth

Introduction

The research article analyzes the relationship between Leda and Zeus as portrayed in Yeats's "Leda and the Swan". Yeats rewrites the Greek myth of Zeus and Leda to show that fate is unavoidable. The metaphor for Zeus is Swan that rapes Leda who is helpless and passive. Leda is presented as a vulnerable creature that is victimized by Zeus who is supposed to have divine power. Swan stands for the mythological god, Zeus who has more physical strength than that of Leda. The use of his power reflects in the sexual exploitation of Leda. Anthony Jordan states, "The beating wings, the dark webbed feet, the long neck and beak. Through this description of its physical characteristics, the swan becomes a violent divine force" (9). Jordan focuses on the physical strength of Swan that violates the law of nature by exploiting an innocent and physically weak bird, Leda. The domination by

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the mythological god makes the representation questionable because the gods are generally considered as the safeguards of the creatures, but the poem presents a juxtaposition. Leda symbolizes idealized and beautiful things, whereas Zeus stands for violence and terror. Yeats challenges the conventional mode of poetry by reversing the law of nature. Yeats uses Zeus as a great beast a horrific, violent animal that embodies tough immaterial concepts. The relationship between violent Zeus and innocent and receptive Leda demonstrates the contrastive concepts evil and good receptively.

Literature Review

The studies done on Yeats' "Leda and the Swan" have demonstrated diverse aspects of the text. Guy Cook has analyzed the poem semantically. For him, the feedback regarding the module has consistently been favorable for numerous years, and there have been no complaints concerning the use of Leda. A lexical semantics has been affected by the term, rape. He said that Julian Assange faced an indictment for rape in Sweden. Although he was not part of this incident, it did make him contemplate if a comparable complaint could be directed at Leda. He confronted a dilemma whether he should keep incorporating the poem into his teaching or not. To examine this issue, he starts by looking at stylistic analyses of Leda, then expands the perspective to include elements of mythology, art, politics, religion, sexuality, visual depictions of the myth, and the various critiques of the poem from a feminist critical viewpoint. The objectification of female character implies the misogynist perception predominant in patriarchy.

Cook subsequently examines Yeats' approach in relation to other poems that explore the same theme, which allows for a clearer understanding of its perspective on the subject by comparing it to both prior and subsequent works. He also briefly proposes that the concerns brought up by Leda pertain to the examination and instruction of other classic poems centered on analogous themes (128). Leda is not only sexually explicit for its era, but it also would have caused further offense by linking the immaculate conception to something so physical and violent. Yeats' personal convictions—an eccentric blend of paganism, spiritualism, and magic—are clearly in conflict with the Church's doctrines. Moreover, there exists the possibility of Freudian sexual analyses of the phallic swan, the spermatic 'white rush,' and 'the broken wall' ("Leda and the Swan" 3). Leda and her various aspects are depicted as staggering, vulnerable, frightened, unclear, and weakening; the swan and his features as magnificent, dark, feathered, white, peculiar, monstrous, and apathetic. The final two adjectives, brute and indifferent, might be seen as disparaging towards Zeus. Besides, it can be contended that moral judgement is not typically associated with mythological occurrences, like an attack by a deity in the guise of a bird, in the same manner as it is with human behaviors. Moreover, the poem is not a rape itself but rather a portrayal of one, and if every literary representation of crimes were considered as the real crime itself, the list of casualties would be vast (Cook 133). The poem is the representation of crime committed so far. Zeus has committed that crime. Cook has explored that the

feminist assessment of the poem is an ethical examination. It is morally unjust for men to treat women with violence and possessiveness, and the poem is ethically incorrect in depicting Zeus' assault in this manner. This brings up the issue of morality's role in stylistics and its education (138). However, the mistake has been made by Zeus that he exploited the helpless Leda.

In the similar line of argument, Bhim Prasad Subedi has explored feminist elements in the poem, "Leda and the Swan". He has analyzed the text by identifying feminist issues. To examine the text, the feminist literary theory can be used. This theory illustrates how Yeats's portrayal of Leda's upsetting experience with the sacred swan includes broader societal implications and upholds oppressive systems that continue to impact society. The transgenerational burden stems from the descendants of this interaction. The children of Leda bear the burden of their celestial ancestry and the intricacies of their connected heritage. Subedi's analysis demonstrates the dynamics of gender roles, autonomy, and the resulting challenges faced by women, presenting the poem as a subtle reflection on the lasting impact of patriarchal power. His research adds to the wider conversation regarding gender in literature, illuminating the complex intergenerational dynamics present in Yeats's poetic composition. The Leda and the Swan tale underscores the lasting impacts of patriarchal power structures and their influence in forming transgenerational challenges within the story (8). The dominance of patriarchy in a literary version is emphasized in Subedi's analysis of the poem. The patriarchal power structures affect the relationship between the female and male figures as portrayed in the poem.

Azra Musovic has analyzed the poem from the perspective of gender identity of both Leda and Swan that are the dominant characters. For the critic, Yeats conveys themes of fragmentation and instability, depicting the feeling of the world disintegrating and reshaping, while also referencing a fluidity of boundaries and identities. This feeling is felt by female lead— Yeats's legendary Leda (74). In Yeats's version, "cones were commenced through the divine fertilization of a human woman – initially, Leda's seduction by Zeus; subsequently, Mary's immaculate conception. By applying this model to historical periods and individual lives, Yeats noted that "a person goes through these stages as he progresses from birth to maturity and eventually declines toward death" (76). The long ranging development of the poet can be observed through the poem. Hamdi Hamdeed Al-Douri has analyzed the poem by relating the core theme with the historical mythical characters including Zeus, Helen and Troy. For him, the poem describes the assault of Leda by Zeus in the form of a swan. This assault resulted in the birth of Helen of Troy, the fall of Troy, and the collapse of early Greek society. The theme is similar to that of "The Second Coming," that highlights violence and the recurring patterns of history, in which each cycle starts and concludes with acts of violence (56). Leda and the Swan is predominated with the act of violence and passivity of Leda lowers her position.

Ramesh Prasad Adhikary has investigated about the role of Zeus in the poem. In his perspective, *Leda and the Swan* depicts the sorrowful plight of women within a patriarchal society, and at times, it imbues women with a sense of rebellion. Although Yeats is male, he has effectively been able to set aside male ego in several of his poems. He thinks that for a better world, men and women need to be equal (216). Despite intense desire for equal status of both men and women, the situation as depicted in the poem exhibits a different angle that *Leda and the Swan* are the juxtapositions. Yeats employs masculine language to refer to the female aspects of the world and seeks to convey the significance of women's bodies and voices in contemporary society. During his era, numerous female critics and writers such as Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Harriet, and others created many works employing their distinct language, contrasting with male writing. In addition to the increasing presence of female writers, Yeats's connections with women and his belief in the occult contribute to a more favorable view of women compared to male writers of his era. Nonetheless, as a man, he is too limited by male egos, which has led to insufficient representation of women in his writing. His internal struggle has been evident in his writing (223). The authorial position has been questioned because the representation of females in his poetry is biased and male-centric. The existing literature shows that the representation of female consciousness is yet to be studied intensively for better understanding of the images, metaphors and other figures of speech used to convey message about the women of the contemporary time.

Methods and Materials

This paper discusses the cruel nature of patriarchy as represented in the poem by using the textual analysis as a research method. The feminist perspective, especially the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir are used to analyze the poem. In a patriarchal system, women are depicted as the 'other' and as lesser beings. Men view themselves as individuals while women see themselves as outsiders. Men believe they are the defining and dominant 'subject' representing humanity as a whole. This 'othering,' as Beauvoir states, obscures the characteristics of women and forces them into seclusion. The categories through which men perceive the world are defined from their perspective as definitive. In her renowned work "The Second Sex", Beauvoir asserts, "Therefore humanity is male, and man characterizes woman not in her own right but in relation to him; She is not seen as an independent entity" (XVIII). Man characterizes woman as a being in relation to himself. Male members regard women as their 'possessions'. Women possess no rights or privileges in patriarchy. Men believe that women are naturally inferior and consequently remain always beneath them. By nature, males are dominant while females are subordinate. One individual governs while another is governed, and this essential principle applies to all humanity. In reality, there is no real distinction between the genders. As Beauvoir states, this distinction between the 'self' and 'other' is not reliant on any empirical truths. It serves to illustrate the difference between good and evil, fortunate and unfortunate, God and the devil. By using this concept of binary opposition, the demarcation between the male consciousness and female awareness as portrayed in the poem is explored in this paper.

Analysis

The article explores the depiction of female status in Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" wherein the poet glorifies the free will of the person. However, the male ego has captured the will frequently. The god Zeus encroaches female freedom by seducing the helpless bird in the poem. The poet stands against the convention that valorizes male supremacy. Therefore, he presents male ego in a questionable state. By composing this poem, Yeats seeks to mention about his ego and desire for Maud Gonne whom he loved very much but could not win her heart. He was desirous of her but could not get her. This failure reflects in the male ego as portrayed in "Leda and the Swan". The poet has constructed the character of a helpless bird that is forced to have sexual relationship with Zeus, the mythological Greek god. Indirectly, he expresses his respect for women. In the sense that he never forced Maud Gonne for any satisfaction. He wanted her but he could not hurt her as Zeus is doing in the poem.

Yeats is opposite mythical Swan. Though he is male, he never forced women to have sexual activity. His personality contrasts to that of Zeus presented as Swan in the poem. Swan attacks a helpless and innocent Leda depicted as a woman who does not know about the future happening with her body. For Yeats, love is sacred and people who love others should not force for sexual satisfaction as his love for Maud Gonne was pious and Platonic. In patriarchy, men force women for their physical satisfaction. By portraying the relationship between Leda and Swan, the poet condemns male ego that does not respect women's desires and feelings. Even in his other poems including "The Lover Mourns for the Loss of Love", he highlights platonic love. For him, love is something of respect not of force.

Patriarchal system fosters male ego that suggests violence, war, destruction and fight. The poet shows contrasts between violence, war, fight and destruction with love, life and peace. The feminists believe that patriarchy values war, and destruction, whereas love and respect must be nurtured for peace and harmony in society. Men express their aggression and domination in patriarchy as portrayed in "Leda and the Swan" wherein Swan dominates Leda because of his physical strength and societal norms support Swan rather than Leda. Feminists critique of societal norms that are the cause of women's oppression in a traditional society. Raman Selden states, "Patriarchy subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as inferior to male" (137). Societal norms and values are male-oriented and they favor male bestowing them the higher rank. "Leda and the Swan" fuses images and themes including raw strength, surrender and the change. The reflection of the change is frightening in numerous manners, "A sudden blow" (st. 1), "dark webs / nape caught in his bill" (st. 1), "feathered glory" (st. 2), "the broken wall ... / And Agamemnon dead ... / mastered by the brute blood" (st. 3). These phrases imply the terror, fear, war, fight and attacks. The negative aspects of male personality are highlighted to reflect men's cruelty over women who are innocent and helpless in multiple ways as exemplified in the case of Leda.

Most of Yeats's compositions poems close with a question. In "Leda and the Swan" he seeks an answer of the question, "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" What does that mean? Does it suggest that Leda should have learned from her experience, and that the outcome is partly her fault? Is Leda mastered? Or is she preserved by the intervention? Although the poet has raised these questions, he has not endeavored to answer them clearly. These questions are for the readers to contemplate on the situation of Leda who is exploited by Swan. When Zeus assaulted Leda with his physical strength and power, he was not mindful of the forthcoming happening. He did not know the reaction of Leda. The poet highlights confusion and ignorance on the part of the attacker and the victim. His mastery in mingling the images of violence with the confusing softness reflects his artistic power. Yet, "dark webs" implies something delicate designed on prey. The selection of words and phrases demonstrates poet's greatness and experience regarding composition.

The poem reminds readers of the pre-Christian age that was the epoch of war, brutality, and destruction. The poet starts with a picture of terror, "A sudden blow" (p.121), that clarifies that the mighty God Zeus is violating and brutalizing the mortal human Leda who is ignorant, innocent and physically weak compared to Swan. This sudden suggests the male ego that seeks satisfaction in a forcible manner. When the relationship between Leda and Swan is analyzed from the feminist perspective, the phrases "staggering girl", "helpless," and "terrified," which come after (p.121), state that Leda is captivated by the violent male as represented by Swan. Her condition reveals her helplessness and powerlessness as shown in her "loosening thighs" (p.121) that implies that at originally, they are both clinched together. Leda discards Zeus body but he forces to remain over Leda. She endeavors to release herself from the clutch of Swan but cannot because she does not have that much physical strength. She seeks to "push" Zeus apart. Leda's anguish, perplexity, surrender, and resistance to sexual abuse are highlighted to show her delicate personality.

The research shows that Leda is a human being who cannot oppose the dictate of the god, Zeus. She just abides by the desire of the god. She does not endeavor to decline Swan represented as Zeus's "feathered glory" and "white rush" because she is left with "helpless breast" and "terrified vague fingers" (p.121). Swan is a strong and powerful captivator that has clutched Lea with force and strength. She is helpless and cannot move ahead to resist directly. The depiction of their union reflects on a sensual desire which can be observed in words and phrases including "thighs," "caressed", "nape", "hold" (p. 121) her helpless and defenseless breast against his chest and then "feathered glory" (p. 121) and "shudder in the loins" (p. 121). These phrases and words reveal innocence and helplessness of the female body. She looks receptive as she is having a lot of sexual pleasure from the body of Zeus. The features can have an impact on breeding, evolution, and heredity. It suggests more significant ramifications for biological processes by highlighting the

dynamic character of heredity and its probable impact on how species adapt to shifting environmental circumstances. The imposition of patriarchal power on the innocent and helpless reflects the nature of society that the poet experienced in his contemporary Europe. Even supernatural powers were sexually prejudiced.

Conclusion

The research has investigated about the female status as portrayed in Yeats's "Leda and the Swan". The speaker has highlighted on the vulnerability of the female character, Leda and the violent and brutal behavior of Swan presented as the mythological god, Zeus. The representation implies the hierarchal relationship between men and women in the contemporary society. The poet has presented the female figure as a helpless and innocent bird that becomes a prey for the male character, Swan. The study has demonstrated the pitiful state of women in patriarchal system due to supremacy of male ego. The writer has been found progressive in the sense that he has criticized. He has supported women by presenting a sympathetic status of female figure in the poem. He has highlighted that both men and women are equally important for the creation of human society. Therefore, men must not dominate women at any cost because of their physical strength. The society cannot continue in the absence of either. The females are equally significant in the continuation of human society. However, they are forced to stay silent and eventually they cannot assert their deeds as Leda remains silent in the poem.

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