

English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832
Prof. Pramod K Nayar
Department of English
University of Hyderabad, Indian Institute of Madras

Backgrounds to the English Romantics- The Debate on Rights

In lesson three of week two, we look at The Debate on Rights. We begin with something already quoted before:

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I wander thro' each chartered street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.
Blake, "London"

This poem is about the recording of suffering and sensibility, but also about social institutions, and social failures of protection.

The streets have been chartered, the river has been chartered - chartered here means regulated, which means that people are kept out. This resembles somewhat the ghettos of the contemporary era: gated communities, private roads, private access, private entrances and so on.

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These discourses of rights, as manifest in works of Tom Paine but also embodied in poetry like William Blake's, emerge from the American and French Revolutions. The revolutions threw up discourses about rights, about the role of citizens, the government and monarchy. Political views from Tom Paine, William Godwin and Edmund Burke, literary writings by Blake, and Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Shelley, and the renewed interest in Milton and the rise of a whole discourse of the rights of women from Mary Wollstonecraft effected a major linkage between politics and literature.

And therefore, we need to see the romantic age as a very politically astute and politically committed literature. Richard Price welcome the revolution in France and in the previous lesson we have already looked at Wordsworth and Coleridge, who also had a huge amount of interest in the Revolution in France and possible outcomes. In his book, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, 1789, he anticipated similar events in England.

A fervent supporter of parliamentary reform, Richard Price wrote enthusiastically about the ardor for liberty. Tom Paine went further, he rejected the authority of a parliament and system of laws built on antiquarian principles. As Paine famously put it, and it is a quote that has informed numerous social causes and emancipatory agendas in the 20th century, including the African, the Dalit and the Subaltern Movements around the world,

I am contending for the rights of the living and against their being wield away and controlled and contracted for by the manuscript assumed authority of the dead. On what ground of right then could the parliament of 1688 or any other parliament bind all posterity forever?

He is asking the question that we have seen African, Americans and the Subalterns including the Dalits ask in India. What is the value of a system of laws or social regulation built upon the dead past, built upon documents which are no longer relevant?

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However, conservatives such as Burke expressed faith in the old institutions of England. Tom Paine had noted that the British monarchy, whose heritability grounds the inherited national character of Britain in Burke's *Reflections*, began with invasion from France by a "plunderer of the English nation" and "Son of a prostitute". Paine emphasized that when despotism becomes established, all institutions are also likely to become despotic:

When despotism has established itself for ages in a country, as in France, it is not in the person of the king only that it resides. It has appearance of being so in show, and in nominal authority; but it is not so in practice and in fact. It has its standard everywhere. Every office and department has its despotism, founded upon custom and usage.

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Paine supported the revolution in France for having restored the "natural order of things":

What were formally called Revolutions, were little more than a change of persons, or an alteration of local circumstances. What we now see in the world, from the Revolutions of America and France, are a renovation of the natural

order of things, a system of principles as universal as truth and the existence of man, and combining moral with political happiness and national prosperity.

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While Tom Paine's polemic was directed primarily at the system of government and national politics, other commentators were concerned with a very different but related one within the domain of rights. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792, now seen as a pioneer text in the feminist movement and poems like Anna Laetitia Barbauld's "The Rights of Woman", called for rethinking the role of education, rationality and political participation by women. Barbauld worded her call to women in martial terms.

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Yes, injured Woman! Rise, assert thy right!
Woman! Too long degraded, scorned, opprest;
O born to rule in partial Law's despite,
Resume thy native empire o'er the best!
.....
Go, gird thyself with grace; collect they store
Of bright artillery glancing from afar;
Soft, melting tones by thundering cannon's roar
Blushes and fears thy magazine.

She warned, "Make treacherous Man thy subject, not thy friend/ Thou mayst command, but never canst be free." Note, like I said, the tone of injury, sympathy, anger. But the language is also of empire, command, artillery and thundering cannon. There is a martial tone to all of this.

Wollstonecraft accepted that women rarely attend to anything with a degree of exactness that men do. This, she claims, is due to the fact that men are "from their infancy" trained to observe and function in certain ways. Women, who "learn by snatches", as she puts it, and those, whose learning is only a "secondary thing", do get the opportunity to train their minds better. She, therefore, calls for sustained attention to the education of women:

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For if it be allowed that women were destined by Providence to acquire human virtues, and by the exercise of their understandings, that stability of character

which is the firmest ground to rest our future hopes upon, they must be permitted to turn to the fountain of light, and not forced to shape their course by the twinkling of a mere satellite.

Note that Wollstonecraft is already anticipating what people like Virginia Woolf, Simone de Bouvoir would and others would say in the 20th century. “One is never born but one becomes a woman” is Bouvoir’s famous phrase. But what Wollstonecraft is saying is there are social apparatuses, ideological apparatuses like education which cause women to think in certain ways because they train women in certain ways. Men, as she puts it, are from their very infancy trained to observe and function in certain ways, so are the women. So unless you change the educational system, unless you change the way training is given to women, women will continue to be subservient.

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By drawing attention to the absence of equal opportunities for women, Wollstonecraft was able to underscore social conditions where women were condemned to be perpetually “slaves”. If Tom Paine called for a change in the government for equal rights to the people, Wollstonecraft called for a revolution in the social order and cultural imaginary.

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The Monthly Review wrote about the work, in fact it praised it for what was going on. This is a brief review from 1792 about “women’s rights” such as they were but contains a direct reference to Wollstonecraft’s work:

Philosophy, which, for so many ages, has amused the indolent recluse with subtle and fruitless speculations, has at length, stepped forth into the public walks of men and offers them her friendly aid in correcting those errors which have hitherto retarded their progress towards perfection and in establishing those principles and rules of action, by which they may be gradually conducted to the summit of human felicity. (1792: 198)

What is that quote doing? It is not an innate or imminent feature of the women to behave the way they do. It is the result of a particular kind of social training, particular kind of training by institutions such as the family, the church or the educational system that produces these kinds of women.

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The poets themselves, but principally Wordsworth, have in the recent past attracted quite a lot of opprobrium for their attitudes towards women. In Wordsworth's Lucy poems, for instance, Lucy is named only towards the end and then she leaves (in the famous poems, "Three Years She Grew" and "She Dwelt Among"). John Powell Ward rightly terms this as Wordsworth's naming-and-leaving tendency (1997: 613). Ward says that "the woman arrives and leaves at once and others [poems] where she is always present simply because she cannot move." (617).

In response to people like Burke, Wollstonecraft and Tom Paine turned Burke's nationalist rhetoric against itself. Each uses a double technique of accusation and irony, at once mocking Burke's nationalism and reclaiming the national terrain. "Justice" was contested in ways that shaped an emerging national identity, economy, and literature, legal developments infused and depended upon a broadly cultural, often specifically literary context. Romantic novels used plots about wills and legacies.

Think in terms of a system of social order where things like education, the family, the church, that is religion, organized religion encouraged and justified patriarchy or slavery. It suggested that there has to be a natural order of things in which there was a working class at the lower end of the scale, women at the lower end of the scale and the elite up there.

People like Tom Paine when speaking about the universal rights of the human race and Wollstonecraft speaking specifically about the constitution of women moved the focus away from philosophical speculations about what the human is to questions of social order and the questions of social justice. That is, you cannot think in terms of abstract notions of justice until you pay attention to the social order.

So even when people like Wordsworth are what John Ward said, naming and leaving women in their poems, they are a part of a thinking, part of a social imaginary where women are meant to be named and left and are not of much consequence. So as you can see the debate on rights was wide ranging. We have not looked at something that has emerged in the last few years, the last decade on animals and the romantic imagination. David Perkins and others have written about it on animal rights which also begins to find its space within this particular period, but that is subject for an entirely different talk.

For now let us think in terms of what Tom Paine is doing, what Burke is saying and what Wordsworth and others are saying and of course the women's response. Tom Paine is arguing that the system of government creates a certain kind of social order and his point, his crucial point is oppression is not only embedded or embodied in the person or the king. It is there across the social system, it is there in every organized form, as in it is there in everyday life.

In response, Mary Wollstonecraft will again point to the social order and say women do not have adequate rights. As we have seen in Anna Laetitia Barbauld's poem, she urges the women to rise up. Her military tone may have been at some point, looking at the late 18th and early 19th century, not received very well. You do not expect the woman to rebel and so on and so forth but was definitely making a claim that women should also claim their rights.

In poems like Felicia Hemans's "Indian City", one again has a woman warrior. There are tropes from the period which you must pay attention to in order to understand that the debate on rights clearly manifest in the literature of that time. For all our traditional understanding of the English Romantics as more or less non-political lovers of nature, steeped in ideas about the consciousness and sentiment, there is a very strong political angle to much of their poetry as this contextual lecture has shown.