

Women as Warp and Weft of Painting through Time: A Select Study of 'Fallen Woman' Across Translational Space

Srishti Sharma

I

Interpretation is an integrated part of translation. Hence, translation and hermeneutics are closely related to linguistic disciplines. Hermeneutics, which deals with modes of interpretation incorporates ekphrasis as a mode of interpretation and thereby extends the temporal limits of translation, if the latter is considered conservatively. In fact, ekphrasis is a hermeneutic exercise that differs from translation only in terms of the degree of freedom with regard to medium: while a translator shifts the meaning of the original written text to another matrix establishing comprehensive equivalence, an ekphrastic interpreter translates a given text into any medium of his choice. Further, ekphrasis, which has often been described as “to speak out” in ancient Greek and also as “a plain declaration or interpretation of a thing” by the *Oxford Dictionary* in 1715, enjoys considerable interpretive latitude and therefore can engender transmorphed texts, that which are visual and musical as well. If ekphrasis is a form of interpretation as much as translation is, then it logically follows that ekphrasis is a kind of translation with greater creative independence. Besides, an ekphrastic spin-off also gains a critical perspective on the original.

This article is an ekphrastic exercise in that it lifts the stories told by some 19th century painting-texts, as well as songs by Bob Marley, Bob Dylan and John Lennon to take off from the stories they tell to a new narrative strand. They center on Lilith, the diabolical, run-away woman, a character of the Jewish folklore. During her aerial wanderings, she spies upon the most doleful scenes of the rejection of a fallen woman whom she claims and redeems. In this narrative, Lilith, the angel and the redeemed woman during their peregrinations come upon the repetition of the same sad scenes of a woman's sufferings at the hands of men. They intervene in favour of the woman victim depicted in the paintings under study, until she re-enters the Garden of Eden and meets Eve to set right the balance skewed against her and womankind. And to bust the myths of heaven and hell showing everyone, human and divine, that the stories of a woman's moral impurities are just canards. In order to achieve its intent, the article is written in two parts.

Gender constructs propose that a woman must embody virtue, chastity,

honour, humility, obedience and conform to the norms of propriety and decorum. A woman who dares question these rules is held guilty of moral flagrance, at the least a *faux pas*, and is degraded to the status of a loose or fallen woman. In a dominantly patriarchal society, “good” and “bad” girls are painted black and white accordingly, alleviated, as a rule, by the ease of sexual acquiescence. The one who questions the norms, engages in forbidden experiences and relationships, rejects appropriated sexual advances and thwarts all attempts made by men to control any aspect of her life is labelled as ‘fallen’. For she fell out of the line and escaped the shackles of patriarchy adamantly trying to beat her into submission and accept ‘her proper place.’ Emile Zola’s *Nana*, Flaubert’s *Emma Bovary*, Krishna Sobti’s *Mitro* from *Mitro Marjani*, Hawthorne’s *Hester Prynne*, Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, Tagore’s *Binodini* from *Chokher Bali* etc. are all women of scandalous repute who transgressed societal norms, thus revealing the hypocrisy of the proper and the virtuous. However, it is not limited to merely the women who committed an act of infidelity or defied patriarchal authority. We might take the *Ramayana*’s *Ahilya*, whom Indra seduced by impersonating her husband. Though not being in the wrong, she was cursed by her husband who considered her soiled and fallen. I need not emphasise the very obvious fact that, the contemporary society still continues to harbour intolerance of rape-victims in a very similar manner. Most unfortunately, however, the male counterparts remain safe and out-of-socio-legal reach. As William Gayer Starbuck said in *A Woman Against the World* (1864):

When a woman falls from her purity there is no return for her— as well may one attempt to wash the stain from the sullied snow. Men sin and are forgiven; but the memory of a woman’s guilt cannot be removed on earth. Her nature is so exquisitely refined that the slightest flaw becomes a huge defect. Like perfume, it admits of no deterioration, it ceases to exist when it ceases to be sweet. Her soul is an exquisitely precious, a priceless gift, and even more than man’s, a perilous possession. (Starbuck qtd. in Mitchel xvi)

Literature abounds with countless such narratives of women falling prey to the double-standards of patriarchal sexual morality. At least in the 19th century, the moralizing intent of not merely popular fiction but also serious fiction seemed to reinforce the contemporary cultural mores that stigmatized the fallen woman and justified her punishment. *Tess* in Hardy’s *Tess of the d’ Urbervilles* or *Hetty* in George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* instantiate these; or the sexually transgressive women in Dicken’s writings also earn opprobrium. I will, in this essay, focus on paintings, particularly of the Victorian period, reflecting the same social attitudes towards the fallen women, masculine anxiety over unstrained female sexuality, and the perception of threat woman’s sexual promiscuity was believed to pose

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to family and marriage, while men equally implicated in these ‘sinful’ things were neither judged so harshly nor punished. The paintings or visual texts, like literature, also debunked sexual hypocrisy embedded in the culture of the 19th century gentility.



Figure 1: George Frederic Watts' *Found Drowned* (1867), an oil painting which depicts the dead body of a woman washed up beneath the arch of Waterloo Bridge, while her lower body is still immersed in the water of the River Thames.

Before beginning the narrative, it would be pertinent to dwell upon the said paintings around which the ekphrastic narrative has been woven in the second part of the essay. She appears to have drowned having thrown herself in the river in despair to escape the shame of being a “fallen woman.” In the background, the grey industrial cityscape is barely visible through the thick London smog hanging over the River Thames. The simple attire suggests her being a servant perhaps, and her arms and body form the shape of a cross. The locket and the chain in her hand suggest a love affair, and the single star in the sky represents hope, for salvation perhaps.



Figure 2: *The Awakening Conscience* (1853) painted by the English artist and William Holman Hunt, who was one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The painting depicts a young woman rising from the lap of a man with her gaze transfixed out of the window of the room.

At first look, the painting appears to depict a disagreement between a husband and his wife. However, the title and a host of symbols within the painting leave no room for doubt, that the couple consists of a mistress and her lover. The position of the woman's left-hand shows the absence of a wedding ring, and throughout the room, one can observe the dotted reminders of her "kept" status and her wasted life: the cat toying with a bird; the clock concealed under glass; an unfinished tapestry hanging on the piano; the unravelled threads on the floor; the print of Frank Stone's *Cross Purposes* on the wall; Edward Lear's musical arrangement of Tennyson's poem "Tears, Idle Tears" discarded on the floor, and Thomas Moore's "Oft in the Stilly Night" music on the piano, whose words speak of missed opportunities and gloomy memories of a happier past.

The mirror on the rear wall provides a tantalizing glimpse out of the room. The window opens out onto a spring garden flooded with sunlight, which is in striking contrast to the images of entrapment within the room. Far from displaying a look of shock that she has been caught with her lover, she is bemused by something that is outside of both the room and her relationship.



Figure 3: Hunt's Christian *The Light of the World* (1851), depicting Christ holding a lantern and knocking on a handle-less door which, according to Hunt, represented "the obstinately shut mind." The young woman having her conscience pricked by an out-worldly spiritual presence here could be responding to that image.

Past and Present is the title given to the series of three oil paintings by Augustus Egg in 1858, which were designed to be exhibited together as a triptych. They depict the discovery and disastrous consequences of a woman's adultery in a middle-class Victorian family. The viewers are left to

determine whether the woman should be condemned or pitied. The paintings reflect fears of imperilment of public morality and family life caused by the Matrimonial Causes Act 1857, which led to the reformation of divorce laws by moving jurisdiction from the ecclesiastical courts to the civil court, thereby making divorce a realistic prospect for the middle-class people.

These works were influenced by Hunt's painting *The Awakening Conscience*. It cannot be stated with certainty as to how these paintings acquired the title *Past and Present*, as the artist was not known to have used the title, even though it was first recorded in the auction catalogue for Egg's works after his death in 1863. We may surmise that it was derived from a misreading of John Ruskin's *Academy Notes* (1855) since he discusses the untitled works in the book below a review of a painting with a similar title.

John Ruskin's *Academy Notes* described the three works as follows:

In the central piece, the husband discovers his wife's infidelity; he dies five years afterwards. The two lateral pictures represent the same moment of the night a fortnight after his death. The same little cloud is under the moon. The two children see it from the chamber in which they are praying for their lost mother, and their mother, from behind a boat under a vault on the river shore. (Ruskin 8)



Figure 4: *Past and Present, No. 1*

The first painting, i.e., figure no. 4, *Past and Present, No. 1* depicts the drawing-room of a middle-class Victorian house. It shows the precise moment when a family's domestic bliss is ruined. A woman lies prostrate on the floor in front of her husband, fallen with hands clasped together and her gold serpent bracelet resembling manacles. He sits dumbfounded, clutching a letter revealing her adultery. An apple has been cut into two pieces; one half remains beside the husband's glossy top hat on the table, stabbed through its worm-ridden core by a small knife; the other half has fallen to the floor beside the

wife. The rear wall of the room, decorated with a rich red wallpaper, also bears two portraits, one on either side of the fireplace and mirror: the wife's portrait hangs to the left, above the playing children but beneath a picture of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (labelled "The Fall"); the husband's to the right hangs beneath a shipwreck scene by Clarkson Stanfield (labelled "Abandoned").



Figure 5: *Past and Present, No. 2.*

The second painting, i.e., figure no. 5, *Past and Present, No. 2* shows a night a few years later, shortly after the death of the heartbroken husband. His children have grown up now: the younger daughter in the white nightgown weeps into the lap of her elder sister, who is wearing a black mourning dress and is looking out of a window at the clouded moon. The portraits of their parents decorate the bedroom wall.



Figure 6: *Past and Present, No. 3*

The third painting, i.e., figure no. 6, *Past and Present, No. 3* is also a night scene. The clouds and moon depict the same evening as in the second painting. The fallen wife is sitting in the gutter beneath the Adelphi Arches, by the River Thames. She clutches a bundle of rags which shows the emaciated

legs of a child, perhaps illegitimate, either asleep or possibly dead. She looks up from the gutter to the moon. The following narrative, as part of critical discourse, shall help understand both culture and literature, and as an ekphrastic spin-off provide a critical perspective on the various interpretations of 'Fallen Woman' across the spatio-temporal matrix.

II

Fallen Woman – A Re-telling

[They represent the archetypal battle of the sexes. Neither makes efforts to resolve their disputes or to reach an understanding where they take turns being on top. Men hang on to their masculine pride and arrogance to suppress a woman's desire for bodily pleasures and longing for social and intellectual freedom outrageous as well as immoral, even though they themselves tempt and abuse women– which women understand but stoically accept. In the end, neither of them wins the battle.]

“Yahweh” cried she, and that cry gave her wings to fly away. She, Adam's first wife, before Eve, left Eden for she refused to lie underneath Adam, who insisted “the bottom is your rightful place.” Lilith, (figure 7) for that is the name of She who attempted to rule over no one, bellowed “Shove your stupid rules up your bottom. For all I know, you invented them yourself. We are equal because we are both created from the earth.” Her mighty wings took her away from the manacles of performing wifely duties and childbirth.



Figure 7.

She flew across the world and centuries, admonished and chased. Cries of “Man-eater!!” and “child-killer!!” greeted her wherever she went. She would

have talked to the women, but they drove her away, screaming “Go find someone else’s home to break!!”, “It’s between husband and wife, who said you could interfere?”, “He hits me because he cares”.

Apropos of Found Drowned

‘Twas night, she looked down to find a drowned woman. An abandoned Echo arose from her dripping tresses. From far, the lament of Philomela arose:

पीकी डगर में बैठे मैला हुआ री मोरा आंचरा
मुखडा है फीका फीका नैनों में सोहे नहीं काजरा
कोई जो देखे मैया प्रीत का वासे कहूं माजरा
पीकी डगर में बैठे मैला हुआ री मोरा आंचरा
लट में पड़ी कैसी बिरहा की माटी
माई री ...1 (Mai Ri, Lata Mangeshkar)

[Summary of the above song: Oh mother! Who do I confide in the sorrows of my broken heart? Oh mother!]

Her body formed the shape of a cross. “Come dear, thou need not be redeemed by thy kind. Henceforth, thy Echo shall be heard.” Lilith took the hand of the drenched spirit and kissed it and said, “No, woman, no crying... woman, no crying!”² (*No Woman No Cry*, Bob Marley). Together they crossed the sea on-foot.

Apropos of Awakening Conscience

The next morning, they stopped before the parlour of a young girl sitting on her lover’s lap as though she was a bird in a cat’s grasp. Her eyes came to rest upon the be-winged Lilith and the spirit. Galvanised, she arose, as if awakening from a deep slumber filled with troublesome dreams. As she stepped outside the handle-less door of the parlour, her fingers touching the outstretched tips of Lilith’s, the world melted away.

The trio continued onwards in their journey a-top the moon. A man letting his cat out swore he saw a bunch of witches fly across the sky on their broomsticks. For a moment he even thought he saw them conversing with the moon. Silly, man! Everyone knows Witches fly planes. Pff!! Ask one if you doubt it. Although, she might hit you on the head with a broomstick for asking silly questions! For the answer my friend is blowin’ in the wind. You bet, the answer is blowin’ in the wind³ (*Blowin’ in the Wind*, Bob Dylan).

Apropos of Past and Present, No. 1

“Wait!! Don’t kill her!!” they shouted in unison. The knife flashed in the dim room, before slicing in half the worm-ridden apple. The man stood stupefied,

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as if the shout had reverberated from his heart. “Leave, adulteress,” said he to the woman lying prostrate upon the floor.

Apropos of *Past and Present*, No. 2

Five springs later, he died. Time flies if you’re over the Moon. “Look! They’re grown,” said the spirit. “Yes. Just like their mother. And she, disillusioned and disenchanting,” said rueful Lilith, “with another bundle at her breast. Such tiny feet...”

Apropos of *Past and Present*, No. 3

“Pour all your heart out in sweet melodies and be a siren in the deep sea, my dear. The child is already dead. Bury it in the water of this river and betake thyself to the ocean deep. Sing to the sailors, the rowdy, drunken men, to their perdition.” She thought over this advice for a while and rose to her feet to do what she had been told.

The exiled Lilith, feeling forlorn, tried to re-enter Eden. The Unholy yet kind Trinity breached the walls of the Garden of Eden. Adam was beside himself with fury: “The impunity of that woman to bring filth into my home!!” But Eve reached them before he does. She had never seen a woman before... didn’t know if there were more out there in the world. She was told that it was only she that had been carved out of his rib to only to serve and obey Adam. And now, she wondered if the stories she was told were all true. What if we were to imagine there was no Heaven, or no Hell below us, rather just a sky above our heads⁴.



Figure 8.

Apropos of Eve and Lilith

She touched Lilith to see if she were for real. They talked and talked for

ages (figure 8). They found that they had much in common. The budding friendship puzzled and frightened both man and deity. Adam, wanting to throw the trio out, invented wildly untrue stories about how Lilith threatened pregnant women and children. How she was a man-stealer, the other woman. But Eve found Lilith to be exactly like her. And you can't control like-minded people.

To conclude, in this ekphrastic spin-off, Lilith, the universal woman, with a robustly energetic self, bold enough to articulate her bodily desire and longing for freedom is considered to pose a threat to the ideal domestic life and the civility of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. Not just that, she could well be a bad influence on "the angel in the house" (Patmore 2010), the virtuous woman, devoted to the husband. Hence, she has been expelled from home, disgrace. But why would the wife walk out of the home like Nora or those typical 'new women'? Better, as this story suggests, the cast-away woman should return home and embrace her virtuous double, peer into her eyes, to be recognized by the other, so that her self-restitution can be possible. Modest and pliant though she is, she ought to discover the wild side of herself, explore the energy and find moral courage to call a spade a spade, and stop letting others turn her into a victim. Eve and Lilith must commingle to be one.

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