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## **Women and Late Victorian Representations of Dreams: A Study of Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm***

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**Abstract:** Interpretation of dreams was largely based on the Biblical and classical viewpoints of prophecy or fortune-telling till the nineteenth century. But with the initiation and surge of the scientific discourses on human mind and brain from the early period of the nineteenth century, dreams were also started to be looked at scientifically. But the general scientific notions about dreams were pejorative and gendered. They were signs of some physical and mental diseases and hence considered as absolutely meaningless. Against this, the popular view about dreams was still prophetic as dreams were regarded as mediums to carry meaningful messages, divine or diabolic. Mostly women were the subscribers to this latter view. Hence, the androgynous ideology made the enterprise of dreaming itself feminine and negligible. This paper seeks to explore, through a textual and psychological analysis of representations of dreams in Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) in the context of Maureen Perkin's essay "The Meaning of Dream Books" (1999), whether nineteenth-century women's representations of dreams were absolutely superstitious or they had indicated the psychological interpretation of dreams even before Freud.

**Key Words:** Dreams, Representation, Prophetic, Scientific, Late Victorian, Psychology, Women Minds.

"Do not ask us how we make our dream tally with facts; the glory of a dream is this, — that it despises facts, and makes its own. Our dream saves us from going mad; that is enough."

-- Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883).

Until the Victorian period, the literary representations of dreams were chiefly prophetic and superstitious, carrying divine or demonic messages, following the Biblical and classical traditions. But with the initiation of the scientific studies about human mind in the beginning of the nineteenth century, dreams were started to be looked at from scientific perspectives. It increased after Darwin had indicated the psychological study of the human mind in the latter half of the century. The nineteenth-century general and androgynous concepts about dreams were a gendered one as dreams were considered as signs of some



diseases, both physical and mental, and as something feminine, meaningless and a prerogative of women. Consequently, the idea of dreaming itself was looked down upon by the male intellectuals. Women writers, instead, accepted dreams as a favourable tool to voice their narratives. These women writers generally carried forward the ancient traditions of dream interpretations.

Maureen Perkins's article, "The Meaning of Dream Books" (1999), makes a study of the nineteenth-century dream books vis-à-vis Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). These dream books were chapbooks or street books which used decoding keys to interpret dreams in an alphabetical order of dream symbols. It has been argued in the article that the women writers treated dreams from traditional – religious and superstitious – perspectives insinuating gender discriminations in approaches to dreams:

There was indeed a common belief that the use of dreams as oracles of the future was very much a part of women's culture. . . . In the nineteenth century, men who would admit to premonitory dreams were challenging the norms of middle-class masculinity of their day. . . . Even in those instances when some approval was expressed of prophetic dreaming, women were most frequently the dreamers. (106-07)

According to her, these women writers subscribed to the general public sentiments of dreams, based on mysticism and supernaturalism, of the century. The fact that no woman writer is found to have studied dreams from the contemporary scientific analyses, which were preserved exclusively for male, indicates the non-intellectual and superstitious status of the Victorian women.

Keeping the rising science of human mind and pejorative notions about female mind and also Perkins's observations regarding nineteenth-century women and dreaming, this article seeks to explore the nineteenth century literary culture of dream interpretations by and for women before Freud's book and see whether such interpretations were solely superstitious or scientific. If interpretations of dreams for women centred round the conventional revelatory perspectives in dream books, as Perkins observes in her article, was it the same in literary representations of dreams as well? This article seeks to take into account the fact whether any scientific representation of dreams in terms of human psychology was done by any of the nineteenth-century women writers. In this context, this paper makes, through textual and psychological hermeneutics, a study of the politics of representation of dreams in *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), a novel by Olive Schreiner, an Anglo-African woman writer of the late Victorian period. It strives to explore



whether her representation of dreams was prophetic or psychological, conventionally superstitious or contemporary and scientific.

Many nineteenth century writers have used dreams in their writings, but it is Olive Schreiner (1855-1920), who has prioritised the form and made dreams a pervasive and conspicuous motif in her writings, using dreams in their various forms, such as sleep dreams, day dreams, fantasies, dreamy thoughts and utopian visions. Her liberal thoughts started getting expressed from her very first novel, *The Story of an African Farm* (henceforth *African Farm*), when she was in her 20's, published under the pseudonym of "Ralph Iron" in London in 1883. The novel was well read in England, creating a significant space for Schreiner in the literary circle of London and making her "Well-established as a leading literary and radical figure by the mid 1880s . . ." (Ong 16). Read as a "hermeneutical autobiography" (585) by Gerald Monsman, the novel makes a tragedy out of the hopes and anxieties, expectations and frustrations, from both conformist and non-conformist ideologies of three adolescent protagonists. Episodic and non-linear in structure, *African Farm* appears to be a discursive study on the controversial themes of loss of faith, education system, gender roles, women issues and colonial politics while narrating the plain, docile attitude to life of Em, the search for knowledge and freedom of Lyndall, Em's orphan cousin, and the philosophical and spiritual quest of Waldo, the son of Otto, a German mystic.

Joyce Berkman remarks, "It is in Schreiner's novels that dreams appear in their greatest complexity, taking on a multiplicity of forms, unveiling character, influencing plot, and offering societal visions" (*Healing Imagination* 218). Schreiner first approaches dreams in this novel from the conventional and prophetic as well as the contemporary and popular interpretations through symbols of dream books. Tant' Sannie's dreams reveal her to be comic and anxious. They appear to be life-like but comical and simply show that her thoughts are no longer occupied with the memories of her two dead husbands, rather she is concerned with the present life and the fear of her future, as she is a widow with none of her own. Sannie was in search of another husband and hearing of a widower's coming to her farm, she exclaimed, "'Then it's he! then it's he. . . . I've not seen him; but my sister-in-law told me about him, and I dreamed about him last night'" (240). Through this Sannie wanted to project her dream to be prophetic. After meeting the man, she further exclaimed to her maid and confirmed the prophetic nature of her dream: "The dear Lord doesn't send dreams for nothing.



Didn't I tell you this morning that I dreamed of a great beast like a sheep, with red eyes, and that I killed it? Wasn't the white wool his hair, and the red eyes his weak eyes, and my killing him meant marriage?" (240). Sannie's explanation of her dream reflects not only the conventional prophetic interpretation of dreams but also the popular and contemporary culture of finding meanings from some dream symbols, as is found in the dream books. Schreiner represents this popular culture of dream interpretation not with any seriousness but to evoke laughter, which is why she has chosen an uneducated woman like Tant' Sannie to project such dreams, quite in tradition with the target readers of the dream books, as Perkins observes:

As scorn became the dominant way in which the educated elite regarded beliefs about prediction, a link was forged between superstition and lack of education. . . . One assumption demonstrated by compilers was that the least educated, the least literate, and therefore the least discriminating were most likely to be women. (109-10)

But a crucially significant dream has been presented in case of Em, the cousin of Lyndall. Em dreams that Lyndall's newly born baby was lying dead and later she could not find Lyndall as well, symbolising or predicting the death of Lyndall herself towards the end of the novel:

I never had so vivid a dream before. . . . someone held up her finger and said, 'Hush! it is a little dead baby.' And I said, 'Oh, I must go and call Lyndall, that she may look at it also.'" And they put their faces close down to my ear and whispered, 'It is Lyndall's baby.' And I went to look for you, . . . and they looked down at their black clothes, and shook their heads, and said nothing; and I could not find you anywhere. And then I awoke. (Schreiner 283-84)

Lyndall, the "first wholly serious feminist heroine in the English novel" (Showalter 199), met her tragedy as she, being a representative of the Victorian New Woman, was educated and non-conformist to societal and patriarchal norms. This is the single dream that Em experiences throughout the novel, and Schreiner attributes such a prophetic dream to her who embodies the traditional womanhood. But its significance lies in the fact that it represents both the traditional interpretation of dreams as prophetic and the Freudian psychoanalysis that dream is a wish fulfilment, a reflection of the past. The dream is prophetic as Em sees the death of Lyndall's infant without having any foreknowledge about the latter's premarital pregnancy. But Em's dream also fulfils her long-standing wish of returning to her childhood days of camaraderie and love between her and



Lyndall, which got disrupted because of their complex relational issues with Gregory. By nature submissive and reserved, it is quite natural that she ruminated on this loss in her mind while simultaneously wishing to get the sisterly bond back which might have got suppressed in her unconscious, as Em reveals herself: ““Lyndall . . . it made me think about that time when we were little girls and used to play together, when I loved you better than anything else in the world . . .”” (Schreiner 284). This desire of hers gets ventilated through her dream. This dream appears to be unique where the mutually contradictory dream representations -- prophetic and scientific -- have been synchronised. Further, Em’s dreaming of Lyndall’s death can also be interpreted from Freud’s psychoanalytical perspective as is recounted in the section called “Dreams of the Death of Persons of Whom the Dreamer Is Fond,” one of the “Typical Dreams” analysed in the chapter entitled “The Material and Sources of Dreams” in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (266-87).

Schreiner has also taken into account, again quite uniquely, the non-human dreams from practical, psychological angles. The first dream of Doss, dreamt after the death of Otto, its first master, reflects its memory about him and its wish to get patted by him. Its second dream, dreamt while lying beside the critically ill Lyndall in a confined room, reveals its past memories and future wishes of free and playful charms in its village home. Thus, both the dreams of Doss, Schreiner shows, are equally wish fulfilments as any human dreams are according to Freud. This dream reflects Darwin’s theory about animal mind in *The Descent of Man* (1871): “As dogs, cats, horses, and probably all the higher animals, even birds have vivid dreams, and this is shown by their movements and the sounds uttered, we must admit that they possess some power of imagination” (74). Schreiner’s projection of Doss’s dreams, thus, registers her idea that dreams are neither prophetic nor is it that only humans have dreams, but even animals can also have them. Hers is a significant and realistic representation of a dog’s dreams, treated quite scientifically, something quite unprecedented in literature.

Another very significant dream has been projected by Schreiner in case of Waldo, her chief protagonist. The description of Waldo’s sleep dream, dreamt after Lyndall’s death and recounted in the penultimate chapter, entitled “Dreams”, appears more detailed and realistic than the rest in the novel. With sudden changes of places and scenes, this dream also ventilates the dreamer’s memory and desire, his past events and future wishes. In the dream, he finds himself sitting on a rock with Lyndall, who appears as “a



small child.” But the very next moment, Waldo cannot find her, quite like in a real dream. After a prolonged search for her, he finds her, gathering shells from the sand of the sea, with an abrupt transformation in her, as she turned a woman then. The dream ends when they finally come to an extended sea beach where Lyndall drops the sea shells and look “up into his face with her beautiful eyes. She said nothing, but she lifted one hand and laid it softly on his forehead; the other she laid on his heart” (354-55).

The dream is impressionistic and reveals introvert Waldo’s repressed passion for Lyndall and his frustrations, acute pain and death-wish upon her death. Berkman makes a very interesting observation regarding this: “A remarkable feature of this dream is Schreiner’s transmutation of who is alive and who is dying. Contrary to reality, Lyndall is fully alive as the dream ends whereas Waldo is fatally stricken by Lyndall’s touch. Perhaps the dream expresses Waldo’s longing to die in Lyndall’s place, if by so doing she would still live” (218-19). This fact once again marks the rational and scientific outlook to dreams of Schreiner, as the authorial comment manifests, “Tell me what a man dreams, and I will tell you what he loves. That also has its truth” (353). Schreiner’s interest in dreams developed from the Biblical lessons that she had got from her missionary parents. But gradually she lost her faith on the parables and the Christian versions of dreams after adopting freethinking at a young age. She developed a great interest in the existing scientific dream discussions. She also tried to find psychological means to interpret her own habit of having frequent dreams.<sup>1</sup> In this novel of hers, the realistic representations of dreams succeed the prophetic interpretations as far as the women author’s treatments of dreams are concerned. Schreiner treats dreams the same way as she considers dreams as reflections of not divinity, but the reality: “Schreiner . . . oscillated between naturalist and supernaturalist perspectives on unconscious activity. When eschewing supernatural angles, she advised that though dreams are revealing they are neither divine nor premonitory” (Berkman 202). An authorial comment of Schreiner’s towards the end of the novel also validates this point:

For, ever from the earliest childhood to the latest age, day by day, and step by step, the busy waking life is followed and reflected by the life of dreams, — waking dreams, sleeping dreams. Weird, misty, and distorted as the inverted image of a mirage, or a figure seen through the mountain mist, *they are still the reflections of a reality.* (353; my emphasis)



Scientific and realistic representations of dreams are not unmannerly of Schreiner as she had a deep interest in the unconscious, especially in the erotic content of it, which she regarded as the source of artistic imagination and intellectual fervour. She was well aware of the contemporary studies of the unconscious by a group of scientists and philosophers who paved the way for modern psychology before Freud.<sup>2</sup> Her acquaintance with Havelock Ellis, a researcher of human psychology and the unconscious, increased her interest in the unconscious<sup>3</sup>, as Berkman highlights:

[. . .] Schreiner read Albert Moll's *Hypnotism* (the most popular book of the series) and Mercier's *Sanity and Insanity*, which familiarized her with current theories on unconscious activity. . . . Evidently, the supernatural directions of much of psychical research alienated her. (201)

Schreiner's friendship with J. A. Symonds and Arthur Symons, who were the members of the Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882, made her further interested in the study of the unconscious. (qtd. in Kohlt 190)

The entire novel is, thus, replete with dreams which reflect the overt psychological nature of the novel. Matthew Fike deliberates on this: "The story told in *African Farm* depicts the unconscious in ways that illuminate the issue of fragmentation. . . . The fact that they are asleep signals an interest in the unconscious, as do a number of dreams (some of them precognitive) later on" (82). This synchronisation of the rational with the irrational is used by the women writers of the nineteenth century in their use of the dream motif to represent the female mind. According to Ann Heilmann, these writers "transport us to the world of dreams, the staff of Gothic nightmares as well as of Freudian visions of the unconscious – an unconscious explored in haunting detail so that it may act on, and politicize, the reader's awareness of the condition of women in society" (vii). It is true that Schreiner's approaches to dreams may not be completely psychoanalytical, but a rational and scientific outlook to it with a complexity in dream states, created by her, unequivocally set the foundation for the Victorian women writers to integrate both mind and emotion, thought and feeling, and take a swerve from the irrational to the rational in their dream representations. Her pro-scientific representations of dreams also dismantle the opinionated perception that nineteenth-century women subscribed to only prophetic interpretation of dreams, as opined by Perkins in her essay.

Schreiner, therefore, becomes one of the late-Victorian pioneering women writers to counter the masculine prejudices about dreams in relation to women and logic. In this regard, Carolyn Burdett's remark is worth-quoting:

By the 1880s, women were describing a whole range of social, political and economic constraints which acted as real bars to their freedom, and which needed urgent redress. In a changed and modern world it seemed possible that women might demonstrate that they, too, were capable of thought and work equal to that of men. (47)

Schreiner's representations of dreams reflect that the *fin de siècle* women writers were acquainted with this new scientific study of dreams as well. Her ways of interpreting dreams in the late Victorian era, thus, challenge both the late nineteenth-century patriarchal perceptions and the lopsided notions of Perkins about women's representations of dreams. They, rather, reflect the late-Victorian women writers' initiation of the replacement of the ancient and prophetic interpretations of dreams with modern, scientific and psychological representations of dreams even before Freud.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Schreiner, Berkman notes, "daydreamed and night-dreamed incessantly; not unpredictably, one of her most popular collections of allegories is titled *Dreams*. Rather than functioning as her escape from work . . . dreams acted as a stimulus for Schreiner. When a Professor J. Sully interviewed her in 1884 during one of her various extended stays in England, she observed about her dream life that, in fact, she dreamt more when she was working hard. She vividly described her absorption in the fantasy activity which accompanied her writing: "I will sometimes write page after page without noticing that the inkpot is empty and there are no marks on the paper" ("The Nurturant" 9).

<sup>2</sup> Berkman deliberates on the source of Schreiner's awareness about the unconscious:

To be sure, Schreiner's interest in the physiology of unconscious processes and their relation to artistic imagination was hardly unique in her time. A cluster of Victorian scientists and philosophers, intrigued by the unconscious, foreshadowed the development of modern psychology and psychoanalysis. In 1872 Frances Power Cobbe had written about dreams in terms akin to Schreiner's. Cobbe's essay "Dreams and Illustration of Unconscious Cerebration," published in *Darwinism in Morals and Other*



*Essays* (1883), was perhaps the source of Schreiner's term "unconscious cerebration." Cobbe cited the research of other investigators of the unconscious, most notably Dr. W. B. Carpenter, whom she credited with first coining "unconscious cerebration" in a lecture to the meeting of the Royal Institution on March 1, 1868, and with whose writing Schreiner was also familiar (*Healing Imagination* 200).

<sup>3</sup>In Schreiner's letter to Havelock Ellis on June 12, 1890, she almost celebrates this new aspect of her knowledge: "It ["conscious consciousness"] is new and strange evidence of that consciousness which I am sure exists in the brain, at least in mine. I am sure that these marvelous (sic) flashes . . . are not really a flash of revelation, but the result of absolutely unconscious cerebration that had been going on in my brain" (Cronwright-Schreiner 189).

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