

AN INTRODUCTION TO WENDY MULFORD, AN EARLY POSTMODERN POET

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Wendy Mulford is a poet who witnessed some of the important developments of the twentieth century British poetry. Her association with British Poetic Revivalⁱ, feminist issues and the communist political parties are all reflected in her poetry. The Cambridge University played an important role in her poetic career and also her association with Denise Riley and J H Prynne. Like most of her contemporary poets she established a printing press by name *Street Editions* in 1972. *In the Big Red Chair, Bravo to Girls and Heroes, the A,B,C, of Writing and Other Poems* and *the Bay of Naples* are her notable collections of poetry. She has also tried her hand in non-fiction and *Virtuous Magic: Women Saints and Their Meanings* is a very important non-fiction work.

Space and time are two crucial factors in Mulford's poetry. Both the elements have always been very crucial to Modern poetry, but Mulford's poems reflect upon space and time in ways that are different to her predecessors. In the history of the British poetry, the twentieth century has witnessed many radical political and intellectual movements. One of the remarkable events in terms of the British poetry is that growing popularity of British Poetry Revival and the steady decline in the influence of the Movement poets.ⁱⁱ

The Movement poets, however, failed to establish their antipathy towards the Modernists as a group. Except Philip Larkin, other poets from the group lacked wide readership. Instead many of the Movement poets' efforts like Larkin's were recognized as individual contributions. Against the motto of the Movement, the Revival concentrated not only on following the tenets of the pioneers of Modernism but also on infusing the ideas into the society through various discursive modes like publishing industry. During the time of the Revival, most poets had their own publishing houses and published a lot of books that were experimental in terms of form and content. Though the intention of the Revival was to merge the elements of Modernism and the British poetry in general, most poets ended up deconstructing the elements of Modernity. The reason is that, poets who figure in these decades including Mulford tried to reinvent the techniques of Modernist poets by altering the Modernist conception of time and space. For example, the Revival poets preferred the local variant of English to the standard version. It is a well known fact that most modern poems are intertextual and often refers to other texts directly or indirectly. The Revival poets followed the same technique with more clarity. A Revival poem was replete with so many other ancient and modern texts that every poem needed a footnote by the poet herself. In terms of themes the Modernist poets started looking at the past glory and lamented its loss and also endeavored in many ways to embrace the glory. But the *Revival*

Modernists [anticipating the postmodern poets] started celebrating the loss itself. The way of life which was against convention was not regretted at all.

In the same way, Mulford's early poems are inclined towards the late Modern poems in terms of form and content. But her collections in the fin de siècle of the twentieth century elaborate a feminist voice. At the same time, the feminist tone is not pervasive in her collections. In general, Mulford's poetry is photographic in nature and structure and having her own publication house has helped to her experiment on the structure of her poems with the help of technology. The poems capture a still moment without any movement outside of it. One of the characteristic features of photographic nature of her poetry is that her poems are expressive sans history. De-ossification is a very significant character of Mulford's poetry. The photographic nature of her poems speaks only the moment and it gives enough space for a reader to find his or her own position within the space of her poetry. Providing a room for the reader to peep into window of the writer's world is a very specific character of Mulford's poetry.

Most interpretations of Mulford's poems place her as a pioneer of the feminist voice and ideology. This method of interpretation is indubitable as most of her poems overtly claim to question the hierarchic structures of her society. But her poems have a sensitive layer that not only subvert hierarchies of her society but tries to be critical of the feminist voice. On the same note, she writes in her article, "Curved, Odd... Irregular. A Vision of Contemporary Poetry by Women"

With what voices do women poets speak? In avant-grade, experimental or Language Poetry (to throw in three assorted and not particularly helpful labels), there is no unified lyric voice-it claims are exploded...In its place, we...follow the text in all its provisionality, its multiple meanings its erasures, silences, chora. Into the darkness, along the glass-silver edge between consequentiality and inconsequentiality, abandoning narrative, assuming a poetics of play and gesture. (36)

Mulford circuitously raises a question in the name of poetic voice. The voice in the women's poetry is indicated through the "I", the pronoun, which has been representing the ego of the Man since ages. From Chaucer's host to Coleridge's Mariner to some of the contemporary poems the poetic "I" is the egoistical representation of the subject. This aspect itself might fail to represent the woman as herself. Mulford in her poems constantly tries to distance herself as the poet from the "I" that pervades throughout the poem.

In order to represent the feminine subjectivity through the "I" Mulford resorts to fiddle some of the common metaphors that float in the world of literature. The silence of women is poetically punctuated with the help of some lexical differences that diverges the common practices of male oriented representations of women. Mulford, as a poet is not only interested in metaphors but the way they break the patriarchal structures of meaning. The generation of meanings through the poetic metaphors asserts the feminine subjectivity. Hence, a few of the Mulford's poems are organized in the form of sequences which try to connect various positions of women as artists. The sequences also relate themselves to the British landscape and try to de-associate with the masculine poetic clichés. Mulford's poetic sequences generate a hermeneutic circle which is specific to women and her interior landscape.

It is very evident that as an editor she has tried to establish a feminist lexicon amidst the dominating waves of phallic metaphors. One such attempts is her book is *In Virtuous magic*, in which describes the power of healing and mysticism of forty five women in terms of the conflict

between history and prevailing legends and spiritual myths. One of the reasons that compel Mulford to redefine the history of the Christian related legends and myths is that they are dominated by priests. A poetic analogue to the above mentioned work is her edited *Love Poems by Women*. It is a unique effort on her part to agglomerate and publish various expressions of love with women who hail from different contexts. In her introduction she writes that the assumption of the single-sex existence has dominated the history of art and hence we see a lot of prominence given to the heterosexual love and hence, it is a worn out theme. Her selection of the poems varies from the expression of the love among women, children and parents.

A poet who publicly declares her political inclinations is usually interpreted within the same political framework. But it is not a necessary tool or even a primal fact in the case of Mulford's poetry. She is highly personal in her tone and especially in some of her poems post 1995. She always stood for a cross fertilization between women who are in theoretical domain and those who are involved in writing poetry. It is left to readers to decide how successful she is in the cross fertilizing theory and poetry herself being both for many years.

In the light of above generated contexts, I will try to place two of her poetic sequences *Nevrazumitelny* and *East Anglia sequence*. These two sequences do involve almost all the poetic skills of Mulford. And these two sequences can be considered as the prototype to understand Mulford's corpus as these two poems lightly reflect her entire body of work. But I will be using some of her other poems in connection with this sequence and also for the purpose of investigating her political oscillations. Mulford's progress is evolutionary in nature. The first poem sequence which welcomes you into the anthology is her well known *Nevrazumitelny*. This sequence deals with the conception of art, artist and the production of art. The structure of the sequence is diametrically opposite to the rhythm in which the lines move. The first page speaks of art and its commodification. Mulford, in her sequence, tries to sever art from the materiality that surrounds it, "A letter like pink thrift breaks up the rock-slate and glasses"(3). But Mulford changes her stand and in the end of her sequence she hints on selling her own art work, "any line you don't buy" (6). This sequence shows us the Marxist viewpoint of an art work and how it is destined to be sold.

Her sequence, *East Anglia Sequence* deals with the sea. Unlike Mulford's other sequences, this is systematically arranged sequence of poems. This sequence can mainly called landscape-sea poetry. It is necessary to know a brief history of East Anglia. Mulford's poetic artifice is evident in the way she blends the historically important year with contemporary times. For example, Salt house is one of the villages in the Norfolk was flooded in the year 1953. Mulford empathetically writes in 'Salthouse 1099, 1953' "...no glories/ of angels no chancel mysteries" (159) indicating the loss of the mythical importance of the place along with the death of the people.

'The Pale Land' acts as an epilogue to the sequence and the first line, "No color, no movement" qualifies the world pale. 'The Pale Land' determines the helplessness of the people and also an impending danger, "The worse for us waiting". The expectation of worse ends the poetry with a skeptically assertive statement like poetic line, "...no God will grant safe passage to our men" (161).

The sequence is punctuated with journal notes or small weather guidelines which accentuate the poem. The prose quality of the journal notes are contrasted with highly poetic and figural lines and most lines are sans punctuation marks. After a brief journal note about the directions of the currents, the poem takes off with a strange note, "Temporarily composed/the

church of St Nicholas /patron saint of fishermen /top left tacked to/ a wide band of/steel blue” (158). The line without a period runs through and reaches a journal entry that explains the direction of the currents. The beauty of the composition does not just lie in the form but it expands to the content. The sequence opens itself in terms of a metaphoric dialectic between the sea, landscape which is expressed in the title itself. The sequence is placed in between the interplay of drifting floods and incessant landscape.

Along with these sequences, she is known for some short poems which mark a sort of significant experiment. For the reason that she has identified herself with the British Poetic Revival, her efforts on changing the form of poetry is not significantly different from the poets of the Modern period. Her idea of including prosaic journal entries into the structure of poetry and contrasting it with unpunctuated lyrical words has given a provision for a new window of meanings. She has a set of small but significant poems which are collectively titled as “The Tales”. They are in the form of small and significant events narrated with short and crisp words by keeping one or two characters at the center. The first tale in the set of short poems is ‘Gabriel Piggot’. The tale is re-told from the point of view of a child, “whose mother gathered up her family into” (14). The speaker of the poem is reasoning out the fact of Piggot’s mother losing house. The reasons start with “loss of eels” (15) and goes on to indicate that her loss is a consequence of a natural disaster.

‘Hannah’s Tale’ re-tells the cult of informants. Hannah, the speaker in the poem is one of the informants. The pattern of poem is such that the memory of the speaker is intertwined with her present. For example, in the poem, she remembers the lords and when she is telling tales related to children and fathers. This indicates the essence with which usually a tale works. This short poem is a significant experiment in terms of form. For example, she has a short poem titled ‘Sea’s Measure’ from the poem ‘Salt House 1986’ sequence. In this poem she has not used any letter in upper case and the poem has a uniformity underling it. In “Sea’s Measure” she manipulates the conventions and places the uppercase of a poetic line indicating a stress and also a breathing point. In this poem, each line is independent of the other but the last stanza which is interrogative, tries to alter its preceding stanzas.

Mulford’s experiments in poetry are so vivid that she has a poem starting with the English alphabet. She, in her book, *And Suddenly Supposing*, attributes a poem to each of the English alphabet. The poem ‘Wales’ sets a dichotomy between what we usually call inside and outside. According to Mulford, the concept of inside is an impediment to the growth of a being and outside stands as a contrast to it. But the rules ridden inside cannot accept the freeness of the outside; hence the speaker says “...began to see/why her people never understand...they could not see” (66).

Reactions to Sunset is a non linear musical-poetic sequence of Mulford’s and it is very experimental of her all sequences. The sequence opens with a sexually charged epigram and the form of the sequence is arranged in descending order. The sexual connotation is de-aestheticized with the ‘verb’al presence of the word “tread” implying violence. The sequence has reference to the popular singers of the twentieth century and it is arranged in the pattern of playing a musical composition one after the other like first it is Cale, second it is Poly Styrene and the last is Nina Hagen. In this sequence only the first, second and fourth parts are given and we apologize for the musical-poetic distortion. The sequence has a sense of continuity for example in *John Cale*

“...at the top of the leg/move over (71)” reaches a climax in the next musical sequence *Poly styrene* with the line, “If you don’t move over I’ll just fall out of bed” (72). The reason of moving to the fourth section is because of its aphoristic ending, “too much husbanding destroys the sauce” (68).

Mulford’s corpus stands closely to her idea of the ‘lie of culture’. Her poetry mainly investigates how a cultural construct consistently favors a class or a sex to dominate the other. The domination in various forms becomes a norm and starts guiding society. For Mulford, the cultivating a norm as reality is the ‘lie of culture’. Is she successful in identifying the ‘lie of culture’? It is difficult to answer such a question. Interestingly, Mulford’s work as a biographer has some glimpses of her being different to norms. She has written the biographies of Valentine Ackland and Sylvia Townsend Warner. All three women have identified themselves with the communist parties in various phases of their lives. Ackland, who was born as Mary Kathleen defied the norms of womanhood and lived for many years with Sylvia Townsend Warner. In contrast to her political ideas her poetic styles are in commensurate with some of the Modern precursors. Similarly, there is a significant difference between Mulford’s political propaganda and her poetic efforts in terms of pattern and style. Poems like ‘P’ from the sequence ‘The A, B, C, OF Writing’ takes a meta position and explains language and history of a landscape. She employs the tone of a biographer when she writes ‘Tales’. In spite of all these classification she is accessible to all readers with or without academic background. There is also no need on the readers’ front to be acquainted with her political ideals to understand her poetry.

Notes

ⁱ The British Poetry Revival is a term that helps us to understand the reactions of a set of poets to the poetic endeavors of the poets belonging to the Movement. The British Poetry Revival had poets who were inspired by the tenets of modernism and tried to rejuvenate the same in their work. Roy Fisher, Gael Turnbull, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Bob Cobbing, Jeff Nuttall and Wendy Mulford are some of the notable poets of the Revival. See, Peter Barry, *The Battle of Earl’s Court*.

ⁱⁱ The origin of the Movement poetry dates back the period of World Wars. The Movement poets have one common aim and that is to write against the Romantic ideals. They also shared an antipathy towards experimenting with the form and content. Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis,

Donald Davie and Thom Gunn are some of the important Movement poets. The term the Movement was coined by Jay D. Scott in one of the issues of *The Spectator*. See, Morrison Blake, *The Movement*.

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