

## IMAGE, DESIRE AND THE SELF: HILDA DOOLITTLE'S POETICS OF MODERNISM IN *BID ME TO LIVE*

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“Oh, the times, oh the customs! Oh, indeed the times! The customs! Their own, specifically, but part and parcel of the cosmic, comic, crucifying times of history.” These opening lines of Hilda Doolittle’s *Bid Me to Live* (1960) announces the arrival of the modern, the birth of the Modernist, and the moments in history marked by both jubilation and anxiety, fascination and horror. This paper offers a critical reading of *Bid Me to Live* as a text that records H.D.’s modernist experiment with Imagism while articulating a strong feminist expression of self and subjectivity. Before moving further into the discussion it is important to bear in mind the various socio-historical, literary and artistic contexts that shape H.D.’s fiction. As a response to the violent events of the First World War and the emergence of the European avant-garde, Hilda Doolittle’s literary Modernism combines the personal with the political. The year 1913 was significant in the history of Anglo-American Modernism as it saw the birth of Imagism as a literary movement. It was the same year when H.D.’s first collection of poems appeared in the *Poetry* journal with her name signed as “H.D.. Imagiste.” It is important however in this context to examine the concept of Imagism itself.

F.S. Flint’s “Imagisme” and Ezra Pound’s “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste” are considered as the primary “manifestos” of the Imagist movement (McGuinness 184). In his document, Flint outlines its three central features- direct treatment of the subject, to avoid words that do not contribute to the presentation and emphasis on musical phrase (McGuinness 184). The movement also gained visibility when Pound edited the first anthology titled *Des Imagistes* in March 1914. According to Patrick McGuinness, “Imagisme as promoted by Pound was a vigorous, edgy, and obviously avant-garde movement, iconoclastic in its practices and radical in its theoretical discourse” (McGuinness 185). Moreover “the Imagist poem is not bound by its brevity, but rather intensified by it: it expands from compression, taking one out of linear time and into a new dimensional fusion” (McGuinness 185). In other words, Imagism is an intense engagement with an image embedded in the complexities of language. What is important for us is to look at H.D.’s position within the Imagist movement itself. How does she re-appropriate Imagism to articulate a female subjectivity and to propound a feminist aesthetics? What are the ways in which she surpasses the limits of the canon set forth by the male Modernists? This paper attempts to address some of these questions.

H.D.’s *Bid Me to Live* is an embodiment of her Modernist and feminist experiment itself. The lyrical, poetic and mystical language of her novel reminds us of Virginia Woolf’s narrative style. One can draw parallels between Woolf’s project of Modern fiction and H.D.’s experimentation with fictional genre. For instance, *Bid Me to Live* makes an attempt to break the

boundary between prose and poetry, fiction and history, between the real and the surreal. Similarly in *A Room of One's Own*(1929) Woolf blends various genres such as historical narrative, private memoir and fictional prose. There are similar thematic concerns that bind Woolf and H.D. such as the fragmentation of the Post-War period, pre-occupation with transience, life and death and most important of all, the question of female agency and autonomy within a patriarchal society. For instance, the “room” becomes a central motif in *Bid Me to Live* where it signifies a psychological space of memory and desire on the one hand but also signifies moments of privacy where Julia Ashton achieves her artistic vision. In fact, Julia charts her journey from a sense of defeat in the face of social conventions to a moment of epiphany when she finally says “But I will find a new name. I will be someone. I will write these notes and re-write them till they come true.” (176) This also reminds us of the artist figures in Woolf’s fiction who experience a moment of revelation through the work of art itself. Through Julia Ashton’s character, H.D. creates a space where the personal and the political come together. It is a reconstruction of a specific moment in history where the war along with the social milieu of the avant-garde artists and the inner mindscape of Julia Ashton are projected onto a single narrative.

Coming back to the question of Imagism, I would argue that *Bid Me to Live* can be read as an extension of her poetics of Imagism. The novel is loaded with recurrent images be it floral imagery or even images of mythological characters like Eurydice. To cite an interesting passage from the text:

Chain smoking. Smoking now, to-night, this evening (this morning) was ritual in sequence, the narcotic incense, the dried crumbled leaf, was actually a leaf, grown with a white flower....It was a white flower, pointed petals, white lotus if you will, white anyhow. Some Buddhistic hangover from a past life. (17)

What we see here is juxtaposition of different images. The trivial matches with the profound, the narcotic smoke then acquires surreal and mystical connotations. And what also marks H.D.’s language is the sheer rhythm and lyricism. The image of “ghost” is also central in the novel. The idea of ghost can signify the burden of memories, loss and trauma while it also suggests a Freudian notion of repressed desires. In H.D.’s use of image, it is important to see how she de-bunks some of the conventional imagery that we associate with the Romantics, for instance the “daffodils.” In a letter to her husband, Julia writes “Those Wordsworth daffodils, they seem cold and non-conformist, they’re not the daffodils we weep to see. Or daffodils that come before the swallow.” (43) In other words, the Romantic imageries cannot be sustained any longer because the modern consciousness is loaded with doubt and anxiety.

The use of Biblical and Greek mythological figures is yet another strategy that H.D. uses to express her subjectivity. Rico compares Julia with the “tree of life” while Rafe and Bella are seen as Adam and Eve. In the novel, H.D. also alludes to the mythological figures of Orpheus and Eurydice. There is an interesting moment when Rico questions Julia- “How can you know what Orpheus feels? It’s your part to be woman, the woman vibration, Eurydice should be enough. You can’t deal with both.” (51) However Julia rejects Rico’s gendered notion of “man-woman” opposition and she rather makes an attempt to understand and represent male consciousness through Orpheus. This also reminds us of Woolf’s notion of androgyny which she propounds in *A Room of One's Own*(1929) by arguing that the mind is dual in nature-it has both masculine and feminine mode of consciousness. Literary critics have viewed Rico as being modeled on D.H Lawrence and so Julia’s rejection of Rico’s philosophy reflects H.D.’s own repudiation of Lawrence’s chauvinistic version of Modernism.

The recurrence of floral and mythical imagery is a defining feature of H.D.'s poetry as well. In poems like 'Eurydice', 'Cassandra', and 'Helen', H.D. endows her female characters with a new kind of agency, she re-creates them, she speaks for them and articulates their agony and suffering. They are all victims of a powerful patriarchal order and yet H.D. transforms their powerlessness into a resource. For instance, Helen in her poem is no longer the Helen who evokes misogyny but rather embodies suffering and divinity. Helen bears the burden of myth, the burden of history yet her beauty itself is eternal and timeless. In 'Cassandra' and 'Eurydice' H.D. celebrates female desire and subjectivity where the movement from silence to articulation becomes the central theme. Both the poems are set in an interrogative mode where the female speakers articulate their desire for freedom while questioning patriarchal authority. There is a strong affirmation of sensuality and the power of the female body that defies any pre-given patriarchal dictum of propriety. In the poem 'Eurydice', the speaker debunks the image of the ideal husband-lover represented by Orpheus. Eurydice accuses Orpheus of being a narcissist: "What was it you saw in my face/ the light of your own face/ the fire of your own presence?" But Eurydice also achieves a moment of catharsis, she transcends her own pain just as Julia Ashton experiences an epiphany in *Bid Me to Live*.

The idea of conjugality is also crucial in H.D.'s literary works and scholars have seen it as a reflection of H.D.'s own troubled conjugal life, her failed relationship with Richard Aldington. As critic Helen Sword points out, Eurydice can be seen as an emblem of the female artist who is trying claim a voice of her own. Eurydice turns the space of hell that otherwise represents "a negative space of literary marginality" into a source of creative power (Sword 185-87). Also in the context of H.D.'s Imagism and Greek mythology, Cheryl Walker argues that for H.D., Greece symbolized a "psychological landscape comparable to the physical landscape of the New England coastline." (Walker 111-12) Through mythic figures H.D. projected her own desire for freedom, courage and ecstasy.

I move on to discuss H.D.'s use of floral imagery in poems like 'Sea Rose', 'Sea Poppies' and 'Sea Lily'. The idea of fluidity as suggested by the sea image is also central to H.D.'s poetry. The use of contrasting imageries marks each of these poems. For instance, in 'Sea Poppies' she writes "Your stalk has caught root among wet pebbles/and drift flung by the sea." The juxtaposition of the static with the liquid is indeed a striking feature. The celebration of the unconventional image is also seen in the 'Sea Rose' poem. The sea rose which survives powerfully by confronting the hostile forces of sand and waves can be read as an extended image of H.D.'s own subjectivity. The sea rose is vulnerable yet immensely sensuous. Similarly, the 'Sea Lily' endures similar violence yet the same violence enhances its aesthetic charm. The relationship between language and sensuous lyricism is expressed in a poem like 'The Mysteries Remain'. Here H.D. celebrates the natural, the fertile, the cyclical and the sensual. "I multiple/renew and bless/Bacchus in the vine/I hold the law/I keep the mysteries true." Even in *Bid Me to Live* H.D. uses floral imagery to suggest a sense of both sensuality and vulnerability. In this context, it would be useful to read and interpret H.D.'s poetry and fiction within the paradigm offered by French Feminist theory.

The theoretical models offered by Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous become useful in our understanding of an experimental feminist author like H.D. herself. French feminist theory engages with the very notions of desire, language and sexuality as each of these categories are determined and regulated by patriarchy. The notion of "écriture feminine or "feminine writing" then lies at the heart of French Feminism thought which challenges the phallogocentric nature of language itself. As Helene Cixous famously announces in her treatise 'The Laugh of the

Medusa'- "I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman must write her self: must right about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (Cixous 875). For Cixous, the movement from silence to articulation is a journey towards empowerment. In H.D.'s *Bid Me to Live* there is a constant anxiety and a relentless search for a poetic voice and expression. Julia engages in an inner struggle to translate her pain and her sense of loss into a concrete form of language. In the concluding chapter, Julia compares her unborn story with the image of an unborn child thereby juxtaposing the idea of maternity and the womb with the process of writing itself. The very act of writing allows her to mediate between the physical and the spiritual, between the worldly and the mystical. "The child is the gloire before it is born... While I live in the unborn story, I am in the gloire. I must keep it alive, myself living with it." (177)

In the context of poetic language one can refer to Julia Kristeva's formulation of the semiotic and symbolic modes of signification. The semiotic is the extra-verbal way in which bodily energy is expressed through language whereas the symbolic is a way of signifying that depends on language as a sign system with its coherent grammar and syntax (McAfee 17). To extend it further, the semiotic corresponds to an artistic or a poetic expression while the symbolic belongs to a realm of rational discourse. The semiotic originates in the unconscious whereas the symbolic becomes a conscious process (McAfee 17). One can read H.D.'s *Bid Me to Live* through the linguistic lens offered by Kristeva's philosophy. The protagonist in H.D.'s novel defies the logical syntax of language and time thereby creating a rhythmic flow of words and feelings. Can this be seen as an enactment of a semiotic, unconscious, artistic language as conceived by Kristeva?

As mentioned earlier in the paper, H.D.'s writing is characterized by a strong sensuality. For instance, in the poem, 'The Pool' she writes- "Are you alive?/ I touch you/ you quiver like a sea fish." One can link this theme with Irigaray's idea of the 'caress'. In her essay "The Fecundity of the Caress", Irigaray re-visits the concept of the caress and formulates her own feminist poetics. She advocates a need for the caress as opposed to the idea of gaze as the caress entails a kind of reciprocity where both the male and female lover achieve a kind of transcendence. But the gaze on the other hand is an expression of hierarchy and power relationship based on subjection and domination. The gaze deprives the female subject of transcendental agency whereas the caress allows her to mediate between the spiritual and the material. As Irigaray puts it "touch perceives itself but transcends the gaze" (Irigaray 159). This can also be linked with the French feminist notion of the *jouissance* which signifies a specific kind of creative and sexual pleasure peculiar to the female body and language. For instance, the intensely lyrical description of the female orgasm in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* or the passionate moment of Molly's soliloquy in Joyce's *Ulysses* can be read as an expression of the feminine *jouissance*. As Cixous writes in *Medusa* "I too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard of songs" (Cixous 876). It resonates with the way Julia Ashton rejoices in her epiphany "When I try to explain, I write the story. The story must write me, the story must create me." (181)

The representation of the female body in H.D.'s fiction and its relation to ritual and ecstasy requires critical attention. Elizabeth Anderson's essay 'Dancing Modernism: Ritual, Ecstasy and the Female Body' looks at the trope of textual dance in H.D. and the performative dance of Isadora Duncan in order to explore the relationship between the body's sexuality and spirituality. Both H.D. and Duncan recover the primacy of the body and reject the conventional abstract representation of the dancer ascribed by Symbolist poetics. Anderson argues that H.D. deploys rituals "both as a metaphor for creativity and as a religious impulse" thereby engaging in



an “ecstatic expression of female jouissance” (Anderson 362). However Anderson also emphasizes that while both Duncan and H.D. hark back to Greek classicism, Duncan resists the element of sexuality in dance while H.D. reaffirms the sexual body, creativity and spirituality. In other words, the poet, dancer and the divine come together in the space of H.D.’s poetics. In this context, I would cite an interesting passage from H.D.’s *Bid Me to Live*. In a dinner party, Rico orders Julia to dance but she refuses and calls herself a “tree.” Rico tells her again “Well, dance anyhow....The Tree has got to dance; dance, hand them the apples.” (111) She refuses once again as the narrator tells us “she felt symbolically clear, frozen, static.” (112) This is indeed a profound moment in the novel where Julia sees dance not as an external performance but as something deeply connected to her psychological and spiritual mind. Having been tormented by her husband’s betrayal, Julia can no longer engage in the fluid and free movements of dance. Her body gets trapped and stiffened by her suffering. It is only the process of writing that later offers Julia that tremendous feeling of ecstasy where she flows through the fluidity of language itself. To conclude H.D.’s Imagism is an attempt to engage with experiment at multiple levels. It is an experiment that re-shapes and re-creates a new fictional form; it is an experiment that configures new ways of re-writing and re-framing the self outside the boundaries of time and space. It is also an experiment that has immense potential for a feminist author to re-articulate and re-conceptualize desire and language while defying the epistemological categories of patriarchy. With a new poetics of Imagism H.D. has in fact surpassed the canon set forth by the male Modernists.

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