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## Vampires: An Uprising Encoded

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### Abstract

Vampire-fiction of the nineteenth century along with presenting the fearful, presents an underlying element of protest against all sorts of oppression which the patriarchal society has consistently been the operator of. Francoise D'Eaubonne's ecofeminism, as a theory with a greater scope as a critique for its inclusiveness, vehemently protests against the four interlocking pillars of patriarchal society, namely, sexism, racism, classism, sectarianism and environmental destruction. A close reading of the vampire-literature of the nineteenth century would reveal that under the religion-induced fear that the vampire-characters command, the texts have become fictional manifestoes of protest. The dimensions of fear that the vampires uphold, are in fact their protest on behalf of those people whose being oppressed or marginalized was due to society's adherence to the differentiae – related to sex, class, race, sect and proximity to urbanity.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, Vampire, Classism, Racism, Sexism, Gnostic

The whole gamut of the English Vampire literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was preceded or accompanied by some historical phenomena which precisely justified the emergence of this segment of the Gothic even after Gothic Literature in general had been subjected to some criticism from people like Sir Walter Scott at the advent of socially realistic depiction of events. Sir Walter Scott in his letter to the Publisher John Murray in September, 1815 while extolling the realistic depiction in 'Pride and Prejudice' severely criticized the cheap thrill available in the 18<sup>th</sup> century English Gothic fiction (Macmillan Casebook on Jane Austen). Those phenomena which facilitated the resurrection of the 'horrible' were the winding up of the momentum for the French Revolution that set the balance of power in a rather enduring mode of oscillation causing numerous movements from all classes of the then French society leading to a degree of disillusionment about the French Revolution in the English intelligentsia; the Industrial Revolution that entailed writers of the time disseminating thoughts on 'harmonization of man and nature'; 'The stereotype of the Victorian gentle lady

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becoming unacceptable and even intolerable' (Wikipedia n.p.) in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century giving rise to a new mould of womanhood; and lastly the fear of invasion that conspicuously generated a separate segment of literature mainly between the 1871 (with the publication of *The Battle of Dorking*, a story about England being invaded by Germany) and the First World War. Interestingly enough, these historical phenomena did uphold certain differentia in terms of class, environment, sex and race and prepared a lasting way for assertion by those who had, in different turns of times, been deemed 'the others'.

Francoise d'Eaubonne, the famous French feminist, coined the term, 'Ecofeminism' in 1974. Behind the emergence of this methodology his observation of the binaries innate in the Western philosophy was truly influential. And every binary is composed of two ideas sharing between themselves a relationship of domination and subjugation. Mind is held superior to body; Spirit is held superior to matter. Likewise, male and culture are deemed superior to female and nature respectively. Ecofeminism which emerged as a critique of male chauvinistic attitude to nature and women and gradually expanded its scope to assimilate voices against discrimination-based issues like racism, classism, sectarianism etc., seems an array of measure-sticks to evaluate a certain sub-genre of literature such as vampire-fiction (as a popular slot within the Gothic fiction) of the nineteenth century. It is only possible that the attitude to or the depiction of vampires in the nineteenth-century English fiction encodes an essentially patriarchal assorted endorsement against which vampirism is a protest-cult.

In the Celtic tradition, as recorded by Dr. Bob Curan there are references found of ancient Celtic stories of the restless dead and of the night terrors that wandered about as soon as darkness settled over the land gradually fused together to create legends of hostile cadavers who left their tombs in order to attack the living( 25). Besides, there were already several melodramas and a few French and German stories about vampires (Scarborough 159). But the Celtic tradition merging with the East-European vampire tradition more prominently brings into consideration aspects like Gnosticism, chemistry of Protestantism with Catholicism, racism, and of course the difference between the industrialized Europe and the Europe with Nature's abundance. This might explain why vampire-fiction, even though broadly categorized as a variety of gothic fiction, is regarded an asserting variant of the Gothic fiction. According to Theodore Roszak no political movement "on the contemporary scene has achieved the astonishing range of feminism... the movement has generously grown to embrace issues of race, poverty, sexual preference, child abuse, war, the Third World, religion, endangered cultures, endangered species, the global environment" (Roszak, 238).

Culture subduing nature is the most powerful of the binaries, for it keeps in tune with the male ego that finds satiation in wending the patriarchal vigor through implementing what have ever been regarded as parts of essentially masculine domain, power and reason. The result is the subordination of Woman and Nature. Ecofeminism also explores an interconnectivity among (i) sexism, (ii) racism, (iii) class exploitation and (iv) exploitation of

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the environment. Ecofeminist critics regard these as the four interlocking pillars of patriarchy. And each of the pillars uphold the implication of domination and subjugation the pivotal binary that determines man's treatment of woman and also of nature.

This ecofeminism can be a useful aperture to look at the vampire-fiction of 19<sup>th</sup> century English literature. But why just the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Firstly, in English fiction Vampire myth was first applied by Lord Byron in his enigmatic and fragmentary story, *Fragment of a Novel*, concerning the mysterious fate of an aristocrat named Augustus Darvell in 1816 and founded a trend that reached a grand culmination in Bram Stoker's classic, *Dracula* in 1897. In between these two attempts to fictionalize a myth that was not essentially English, we got William Polidori's 'The Vampyre' in 1819; Elizabeth Caroline Grey's *The Skeleton Count or the Vampire Mistress* in 1828; Thomas Preskett Prest's *Varney, the Vampire or The Feast of Blood* in 1847 which was 'a penny dreadful'; and Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* in 1872. Secondly, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century vampires had not yet entered English fiction and in the twentieth century vampires were found more comfortable in movies than in fiction. Besides after the publication of 'Dracula' any possibility of improving upon the rendering of the Devil seemed remote.

Vampires uphold the spirit of protest. Their malevolence can be interpreted as an assorted antagonism against multi-dimensional oppression. The oppression the interlocking pillars facilitate, produces an opposing attitude of heterogeneity to erect the image of vampire a cult-critique of 'enterprising' patriarchy. And the fear the cult generates within a man-propagated theological dualism of the good and the evil, becomes the revenge and even though it entails a strengthening of faith in the tenets of religion, it constructs a counter-pattern that challenges the established religion. Few nowadays are familiar with even the basic tenets of Gnosticism, misunderstanding attaches freely to the faith. But in the earliest centuries of Christianity it was sectarian animosity rather than ignorance that drove popular misconception, as numerous propagandistic screeds written to discredit the Gnostics and other early Christian groups came to be regarded as truth. Penned by the early Church Fathers—the men who first codified orthodoxy—books like Irenaeus's five-volume *Against Heresies* characterized Gnosticism as the refuge of perverts; of insane, depraved, life-hating freaks who held orgies, practiced promiscuity and homosexuality, aborted and devoured fetuses, and refused to bear children. By discrediting the morals of Gnostics, early theologians convinced their followers that the Gnostics' teachings were absurd and misguided. Most of these features can be associated with vampire-characters. So, in a way, vampires opting for others' blood, placing themselves in the functional stand, contradictory to what Christ is worshipped for giving His blood for humanity, is a gesture of avenging a long-observed religious segregation and disparagement. Besides, in the occidental vampire-hunters' expedition into the Transylvanian region there is an obvious suggestion of

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Protestantism penetrating deeper and deeper into the untouched peasant culture of Catholic Eastern Europe.

The vampire tradition, as we find it in English literature, is a composite one to the making of which have gone the Medieval werewolf tradition; the incubus-succubus tradition with its obvious implication of gender-domination being liberated, as a concept, from male chauvinism and presented to a large extent as being an affair where both the sexes might take the upper hand. *The Skeleton Count* by Elizabeth Caroline Grey and *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu are very important writings in this respect. *The Skeleton Count*, published in 1828 in a 'penny dreadful' is written in the gothic style (castle, pact with the devil etc) but is more notable for being the first vampire story written by a woman. In *The Skeleton Count or The Vampire Mistress* the girl chosen for some esoteric experimentation is transformed into a vampire to pose threat for male arcane erudition. On the other hand *Carmilla* involves woman-characters who pose certain questions before sexual behavioral paradigm recommended by the patriarchal authority. This is present in an even more elaborate way in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. *Dracula* represents deviant sexuality. *Dracula* displays the breakdown of normal gender roles posed by woman, by creating a physical transformation from the sexually passive woman into the sexually aggressive vampire in his victims. This would have evoked anxiety in those members of society still upholding the Victorian values, as gender identity expectations were being redefined, and the clear distinction between the sexes provided a comfort zone. The sexual initiative is restored to the men by the negation of Lucy's 'aggressive' female sexuality. Victorian patriarchy castigates her through the ritual of inserting a stake through her heart, which is, as Victor Sage believes, nothing short of a rape. This is a corrective penetration (Craft 118). She can henceforth live on as a beautiful, spiritual memory for all of them. The aspect of female hetero sexuality is contained in a much shorter fabric in Pollidori's *Vampyre* where Lord Ruthven has been portrayed as a Byronic hero, preaching promiscuity "all those female whom he had sought, apparently on account of their virtue, had, since his departure, thrown even the mask aside, and had not scruples to expose the whole deformity of their vices to the public gaze." Underneath this suggestion of heterosexuality there is also the 'unmasking' which may be taken as an emblem of women's emancipation.

In all the stories the world of the vampires and the world of people have been separated by the same line that differentiates the wild from the urban. All the vampire-stories that come into the purview of this discussion, elaborately describe a journey into the wild that had to confront with the rapidly changing topography due to the Industrial Revolution. The vampires seem to thrive on the wild or the uninhabited. The Nature here seems to be avenging her humiliation in the hands of 'culture' entailing an assessment of the relation of mind, or human intelligence to nature (Ruether 21).

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In *Carmilla* wilderness surrounds human activities to induce them to a feeling of seclusion and thereby create a feeling of helplessness. In *Varney the Vampire* the onslaught from the undead in the initial chapter of the novel is accompanied by turbulence of nature. In *Dracula* the voyage of the Count is in unison with the trepidation issuing automatically from the sea getting rough, an unusually dense fog reducing visibility in the city of London, and the beasts getting restless. In *Dracula* the invasion of the wild becomes even more wholesome through the spiritual connection that Mina seems to share with the Count and the Wilderness of which she seems to have become a part. Stigmatized animals like Wolves, bats, rats (*Dracula*), black cat (*Carmilla*), a stork with a snake in her beak as some sort of premonition (Byron's *Fragment of a Novel*) intensify the horror for the human-characters in the novels. Moreover, as Victor Sage says in his *Horror Fiction in the Protestant Tradition*, an unspoken play on "womb" and "tomb" strengthens the relationship between the revenants and mother Earth, implying there by the possibility of their resurrection as malevolent agents of mother-nature (12).

There is a Noticeable class consciousness accompanied by a degree of forcefulness in converting resilience from others in accepting his class into acceptance. Their conventional aristocracy and parasitic bloodlust has associated vampires with Marxist theory, in particular regarding the metaphor that "capital is dead labour, that vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks" (Karl Marx's *Capital*, qtd. in Macdonald 194). Marx's *Das Kapital* also contains images of a vampire, "Capital is dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more it sucks"; "the prolongation of the working day... only slightly quenches the vampire thirst for the living blood of labor." But in all the 19<sup>th</sup> century vampire stories the protagonists who constitute the all important axis for conflict, do hail from the aristocracy. And most importantly, all of them seem to be striving to set things right after the traumatic experience of near annihilation following the French Revolution – 'the reign of terror'. The fear of bourgeois civilization is summed up in *Dracula*, as it arose during the height of the Industrial Revolution that experienced the emergence of the Middle-class. The same is true about the lady-vampire in *Good Lady Ducayne* (1896) by Mary Elizabeth Braddon. It is the fear of the working class in *The Skeleton Count* by Thomas Preskett Prestt. So if "struggle" is something that one would associate with someone at the receiving end, after the French Revolution, at the time of setting up of this English vampire literary Tradition, it is the aristocracy which was at the receiving end. An Eastern-European association of most of the vampire-characters explains the difference in the state of aristocracy in Western European and Eastern-European countries. In George Lefebvre's *The French Revolution: From Its Origin to 1793* we get the difference:

These nobles, united by marriage and professional solidarity formed a separate oligarchy...They eagerly espoused aristocratic manners, affecting snobbery and



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disdaining the excluded; in turn they changed the noble mentality, making it more bourgeois... The change was less marked as one advanced eastward in Europe... The bourgeoisie counted for little in Central and Eastern Europe, where the aristocracy vied with monarchical power after all. But in the West, particularly in France, the nobility competed with both the royal authority and the bourgeoisie, nourishing a strong resentment against the throne that had relegated it to an inferior position and jealously guarding its separate existence against the encroaching ascendancy of the middle class. (41-2)

That is why for the confrontation to take place the vampires have to arrive at the then socio-political hotspot in Western Europe – England in our cases. And this particular aspect of the vampires hailing from an alien culture actually ushers us to the important aspect of racism.

Racism, counter-racism to be precise, is there as well. Suggestively it exists in the form of retaliation as is common between the conquistadors and the ‘natives’. The home of the vampire-lore, the Eastern European region, came in contact with proper Europe through the Germans and the Germans presumably came to The Eastern European region with a ‘superior’ culture and consequently with a spirit of racial discrimination. They demonized the local rulers, making them appear malevolent enough to alienate them from Western European people. Vlad the Impaler, the real life counterpart of Bram Stoker’s ‘Dracula’ is one such demonized character. Now in Bram Stoker’s ‘Dracula’ the Count arrives at the centre of modern European culture almost in the same way as European colonizers invaded other lands to colonize by the sea, and in a way counters the modern European culture with his medievalism and animal incarnations which are suggestive of the Count waging war against culture pressing hard on nature and her native races. In Polidori’s *The Vampyre* or in *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu as in *Dracula* by Stoker the orient has been suggestively upheld as the origin of fear. The greater part of Polidori’s *The Vampyre* is about an eastward journey; in *Dracula* the avenging band relinquishing their cozy, western-European environment undertake a perilous journey to the east into the realm of vampires. In Lord Byron’s vampire story, *Augustus Darvell* we see that after journeying through various countries of the south of Europe the attention of Darvell and the author-narrator is finally turned towards the East. In *Carmilla* Carmilla is seen to be spending much time looking eastwards. This eastern reference comes through the use of cabalistic words by the necromancer-protagonist in *The Skeleton Count*. This reference to the East, that is to an alien culture may be regarded a distilled form of the English fear of invasion. In Horror Fiction in the Protestant Tradition Victor Sage elaborates on this English Fear of invasion by referring to the reception *The Wandering Jew* by Eugene Sue got. “This extraordinary novel takes up the motif of the wandering Jew and grafts it onto a rabble-rousing tale about the regaining of France by the Huguenots.... They are destined to win back their inheritance” (Sage 39).

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Historically the chemistry between France and England during the heyday of Napoleon caused a legitimate degree of this fear. The words from Napoleon were intimidating enough (France) must destroy the English monarchy, or expect itself to be destroyed by these intriguing and enterprising islanders.... Let us concentrate all our efforts on the navy and annihilate England. That done, Europe is at our feet. (Wheeler 7)

Apart from France England had already antagonized races during their colonial conflicts. Then again in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it waged a war against the Russians – the Crimean War. So the fear of invasion was encoded in the English characters' confrontation with the vampires. Count Dracula's coming to London, or Carmilla being unscrupulously accepted into the family of Laura and her father, or in *Varney the Vampire* the opening scene beginning with Varney's intrusion into the room of Flora Bannerworth exemplifies the English fear of invasion. In *Dracula* the lecture of Van Helsing distills the spirit of racism in an obvious way: "For, let me tell you, he is known everywhere that men have been. In old Greece, in old Rome, he flourished in Germany all over, in France, in India... and in China, so far from us in all ways, there even is he, and the peoples for him at this day" (Stoker 184). So the writer here separates his own race from all other races and then goes on to subvert some particular ones like the berserker Iclander, the devil-begotten Hun, the Slav, the Saxon, the Magyar through the same lecture by Van Helsing (184). When Van Helsing instructs the occidental vampire hunters about the Gnostic powers of the Count he also announces the primary limited premise of the occult: no demon can "enter anywhere at first, unless there be some one of the household who bid him to come; though afterwards he can come as he please" (185). In other words, an "evil" spirit cannot cross a threshold unless first invited by an indweller. This is what H. Clay Trumbull calls "the covenant of union." Each must voluntarily and unite oneself with a new world. In *Carmilla* too, the incident of inviting a helpless girl into the household unleashes all that is fearful.

A close study of the texts could easily suggest that the English Vampire Fiction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be seen as a ploy for protest against Sexism, Racism, Classism (Sectarianism will be treated as a type of Classism) and Culture that stands at a binary opposition to nature. For these are the mechanisms which have always dictated terms to the society, set rules and created demons to mould public opinion to disperse any possible threat to patriarchy. Ecofeminism, a post-modern literary theory promoting a composite spirit of protest, would provide a reader with just the required perspective to decode the fear and to interpret it as a mechanism to cover the underlying spirit of insurrection. In fact the way a vampire functions in the apparent fictional level is just an emblematic deconstruction of the social order beginning, at the microcosmic level, with the contamination of an individual. In his *Metamorphoses of the Vampire in Literature and Film: Cultural Transformation in Europe, 1732-1933* Erik Butler truly observes:

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Sociologically, the literary exaltation of individualism requires the weakening of an older cultural order that, while constricting ambitious souls, also assured peace to more modest ones. As we will see, vampires thrive where the heroes of modern individualism experience their greatest triumphs: the realm of imagination, erotic exploit, knowledge-seeking, and foreign adventure....the vampire lacks definite contours of individuality and corrodes the identities of those with whom it comes into contact. (16-7)

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