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### **A Brief Study On The Selected Poems Of Vicky Feaver**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The chronology of British Literature is that artists have used society's views as a basis to examine the afterlife, and look at it in new ways. The afterlife has been a theme in British Literature from Anglo-Saxon period of Beowulf to the twentieth century writings of Dylan Thomas. The society's values greatly influenced the monks revision of the poems. "The Seafarer" is another Anglo-Saxon poem which deals with the afterlife. One great poet amongst the British writers is Vicki Feaver. Vicki Feaver's poetry has a highly distinctive tone, by turns poignant or sinister, and is highly regarded despite the appearance of only two slim poetry volumes in more than twenty years. In identifying her influences, one might think of Sylvia plath, Denise Levertov and Elizabeth Jennings. Feaver's poems always come back to 'contemporary relationships-not so much domestic as domestic gothic; where the woman are sensual and murderous'. This paper brings out the brief study of two poems by Vicki Feaver which stay connected with that of the female. St. Agatha's breast and The Sacrifice speaks about the worry of female.

**KEY WORDS:** St Agatha's, Christianization, The Sacrifice, Nike Balustrade

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The term “Literature” describes written and sometimes spoken material. Derived from the Latin word *Literatura* means “writing formed with letters,” literature most commonly refers to works of the creative imagination, including poetry, drama, fiction, nonfiction, journalism, and in some instances, song. Literature has not been captured in written media but has been passed down in a long oral tradition of storytelling, myths, ritual speeches, etc. Literature represents the culture and tradition of a language or people. The concept is difficult to define, though many have tried, it's clear that the accepted definition of literature is constantly changing and evolving. For many, the word literature suggests a higher art form; merely putting words on a page doesn't necessarily mean creating literature. A canon is the accepted body of works for a given author.

Some works of literature are considered canonical, that is, culturally representative of a particular genre. Works of literature, at their best, provide a kind of blueprint of human civilization. From the writings of ancient civilizations like Egypt, and China, to Greek philosophy and poetry, from the epics of Homer to the plays of Shakespeare. Works of literature give insight and context to all the world's societies. In this way, literature is more than just a historical or cultural artefact; it can serve as an introduction to a new world of experience. Literature gives an opportunity to enrich the life by sharing in the thoughts and wisdom of others.

The earliest production of English literature is directly linked to the Anglo- Saxon invasion of the British islands from the continent and to the later process of Christianization which started at the end of the sixth-century. Until Christianization the Anglo-Saxon had no genuine form of complete writing. Culture, Literature and learning flourished in monasteries and though much of the writing was in Latin around the year of 700 many Christian monks began writing in the vernacular language named “Old English”. The literature of Anglo-Saxon period in Britain includes both verse and prose production, where in point of literacy poetry being by far superior to prose. Old English poetry includes the verse production of two known poets Caedmon and Cynewulf and number of poems survived as epic poetry and heroic poems. The poems, songs, tales and other types of literature constituted the collective creation of the people and were unwritten since the pagan tradition forbade men to write them down.

Beside these more or less famous works of Old English poetry, many of them fragments of longer texts whose precise dating is difficult or impossible to make , there were some other anonymous Anglo-Saxon poems such as the charms and the riddles. One of the few Old English lyrics that reflect upon nature more positively than other works is the poem entitled the Seafarer.

Other examples of the Old English lyric include *The Rain Burg*, *The Wife's Complaint* and *The Husband's Marriage*.

Vicki Feaver an English Poet studied music at Durham University and English at University College, London, and later worked as a lecturer and tutor in English and creative writing at University College, Chichester, where she is an Emeritus professor. She now lives with her psychiatrist husband in Dunsyre, South Lanarkshire, Scotland at the foot of the Pentland Hills.

On 14 January 2014, Feaver participated in the BBC Radio 3 series "The Essay-Letters to Young Poet". Taking Rainer Maria Rilke's classic text *Letters to a Young Poet* as inspiration, leading poets wrote a letter to a protege.

Her collection *The Handless Maiden* (1994) won a Heineman Prize, was shortlisted for the Forward Prize, and includes the 1992 Arvon Competition prize winner 'Lily Pond' and the 1993 Forward Prize winner of the best single poem, 'Judith'. A new collection, *Like a Fiend Hid in a Cloud*, is due out from Cape in 2013.

With just three collections in over 30 years, Vicki Feaver has nevertheless made a substantial mark on contemporary British poetry. Described by Matthew Sweeney as "domestic gothic", her poems often explore the domestic, everyday world through the deeper world of myth, folklore, and terrifying transformation. She is in the deepest sense a feminist poet, whose work has been concerned with uncovering the creativity and power that has been repressed in so many women for so long. This access to the pent-up emotions that drive people's actions underpins all Feaver's work, and it's not at all surprising that she cites Stevie Smith as one of her main influences. The poems operate through story – they build characters, they tell what occurs, how things lead to other things. They are utterly un sentimental, but full of a warm, wry humour that can dissolve into tragedy or bathos. Feaver's murders and frets are based firmly within the family: 'Medea's Little Brother', a series of poems about her rather grim grandmother. There is blood, as the title of her collection *The Book of Blood* tells us. We're full of it. Violence is everywhere. In 'The Gun', putting a gun on the table "brings a house alive". Flowers are also important in Feaver's work, marking off a space of territory that drives much of the emotion in her poems. Flowers are, as she says, sexual organs. The drive to live is not soft and fuzzy, but in fact is what powers her characters. Her eroticism is matter-of-fact, joyful, and as physical as it is emotional. Love, death, anger, energy and life are all pieces of the same jigsaw puzzle in Feaver's poetry. This paper is a briefing of Vicki Feaver's selected poems.

## **St Agatha's Breasts And The Sacrifice.**

### **ST AGATHA'S BREASTS**

Vicki Feaver's "St Agatha's Breast" is a dramatic monologue about breast-consciousness and its implication and purpose. The poem is fashioned after a painting by Cariani alias Giovanni Busi. Saint Agatha (231-251AD) dedicated her life for Christ and when Quintianus, the prefect of Rome, wanted to go to bed with her she refused. As a consequence she was sent to a brothel and finding her intractable and unrelenting she was later sent to prison where she suffered gruesome tortures which included severing of her breasts. She is the patron Saint of breast cancer patients, wet nurses, fire, earthquakes etc.

It is a frank confession of pubescent girls who either compare notes or sneak around to satisfy their curiosity by squinting at other girls. The development of breasts is never a cake walk but fraught with painful inconveniences that just don't last for a day or two but for months and months like a fruit that swells in a "heated greenhouse." It is slow painful progressive process and seeks attention like the plants kept in the glasshouse that need to be protected from winter's cold. It is the most sensual/sexual organ on a woman's body for "A woman [isn't] a woman without breasts."

St. Agatha's breasts were severed because she refused to grant sexual favours, but not all women are saint Agathas. Many women today get their breasts lacerated and scraped from their bodies not because they have dedicated their lives to God like St. Agatha but because of a god-sent curse, cancer. And so ironically St. Agatha is looked upon as the patron saint of breasts cancer patients just because her breasts were scooped for the very reason other women would never ever dare to vouch.

Losing a breast or two is no longer a rarity in today's world but a common occurrence as "one after another, friends/ lost their breasts." In the face of this dread disease there is always a chance of recovery but breast cancer like the amputation of a hand or leg, recovery is reduced to scars and replica. They grieve in the manner of funerals and move on. Yet it is a fact that "A woman wasn't a woman without breasts."

In matters of death, cancer knows no class, caste, religion, nationality and strikes the beautiful and the ugly alike, including men. But unlike death the leveller, breast cancer doesn't bring about equality. It shames, it saddens, it amputates, it scars and the statement "A woman wasn't a woman without breasts" is not about taking her to the level of being a man but a lesser woman. One would not hesitate to recount the experiences of Fanny Burney's opening incision of her mastectomy without the advantage of anaesthesia.

Yet when the dreadful steel was plunged into the breast cutting through veins arteries flesh nerves . I needed no injunctions not to restrain my cries. I began a scream that lasted unintermittingly during the whole time of the incision and I almost marvel that it rings not in my Ears still! So excruciating was the agony. When the wound was made, and the instrument was withdrawn, the pain seemed undiminished, for the air that suddenly rushed into those delicate parts felt like a mass of minute but sharp and forked poniards, that were tearing the edges of the wound but when again I felt the instrument describing a curve cutting against the grain, if I may so say, while the flesh resisted in a manner so forcible as to oppose and tire the hand of the operator, who was forced to change from the right to the left then, indeed, I thought I must have expired.”

The severing of the breasts of St. Agatha wasn't a life saving mutilation but a punishment she was coerced to bear for refusing to give in to the sexual demands of a man. It is the height of sexual abuse and violence. St. Agatha lived in the third century and not much account of her life is recorded but the legend continues to survive. Feaver having seen many of her friends losing their breasts to cancer is appropriately thinking of the right person. The virgin, breastless Agatha.

But what Vicki Feaver gazes at is again a reflection of what a man conceives and projects. St. Agatha in the painting of the Italian Renaissance painter Cariani is presented in a calm and serene mood, royally robed, giving a side glance, warming or squeezing one breast with her right hand which is separated by a palm branch from the other breast placed on “a shallow glass dish” completely free from any goriness. One could easily visualise her as a buxom and sensuous woman, not wanting to part with her severed breasts, almost feeling the extended pleasure in squeezing. The painting spares the viewer the gruesome mutilation of the breasts which Fanny Burney vividly and minutely renders. Vicki Feaver provides two interpretations: “to express milk, or excite a gazer’s passion” which are inappropriate in the case of St. Agatha. She never was married. Therefore, there’s no question of her trying to “express milk” unless symbolically it refers to maternal instincts with which women are endowed. She was imprisoned and persecuted for refusing to give up her virginity and martyred. Hence, there’s no reason to “excite a gazer’s passion.” But looking at the painting from the perspective of modern women who undergo mastectomy one cannot but think of Sindhu, a character in ShashiDeshpande’s *In The Country of Deceit*, who wished that her husband would fondle her breasts for the last time, the breasts which gave both of them so much pleasure and bonding instead of a handshake before she is taken into the theatre. Thus, severing of the breasts though one might not be a mother and an asexual like St. Agatha, is cutting off the very essence of a woman’s existence for “A woman [isn’t] a woman without breasts.”

Many women today are breastless which includes one of the most beautiful woman in the world (Angelina Jolie) and most talented playwright like Eve Ensler. Both of them have acted as a

source of strength to women the world over and continue marching ahead in life with their heads held high.

### **THE SACRIFICE**

(after the drawing 'Two Girls with Billowing Robes and a Bull' by Pietro Testa)



This drawing reproduces part of an antique relief known as the Nike Balustrade, which is now in the Uffizi in Florence. It shows the relief prior to its restoration by the eighteenth-century sculptor, Bartolomeo Cavaceppi. This copy was commissioned by the celebrated seventeenth-century collector and antiquarian Cassiano dal Pozzo for his 'Paper Museum', a highly ambitious project to record and classify in drawings all branches of human knowledge and culture, with particular emphasis on classical antiquity and natural history. This drawing is one of a large group of copies after ancient sculpture from the Paper Museum, and formed part of an album formerly owned by William Stirling Maxwell (1818-1878). Maxwell was a pioneering Scottish art collector and writer on Spanish Art.

The first line of the opening stanza is in the past tense: "We brought him up from a calf," and the next three lines are in the present tense. The "We" speaker of the poem is one of the two ladies informing the readers that they looked after "a calf from its infancy, diligently feeding it with "milk from a silver bowl" as though he were in human terms a "very important creature," and in keeping with his importance they "brush his hide" until it begins to glow like the moon in the sky." The opening stanza creates the feeling of the two ladies being genuine animal lovers who assiduously look after the calf, pampering him in every which way possible, setting example for others to emulate.

The first quatrain has an open form (free verse) with lines of uneven length and no rhyme scheme, giving the poet the flexibility to express her ideas without being tied up by niceties meter. The imagery for the most part is visual and kinetic, filling the canvas with details that stand out in sharp relief.

Having made a transition from a calf into a bull, the ladies set off with him running between the two of them, restrained "only by the mesmerizing swirl" of "their robes." On and off the bull turns its head to keep the "I"- speaker "in his sight." The bull and the ladies moved in perfect unison

“like partners in a dance.” “hock to thigh, hoof/ to bare foot” creating a picture of mutual joy, gaiety, warmth and affection. These lines remind us of a kindred situation in John Keats’ poem “Ode: On a Grecian Urn”:

While Keats’ poem hints at the sacrifice in some remote town, Vicki Feaver’s poem describes the gory details of the actual process of slaughter. As the knife sinks into his throat, the poor, unsuspecting animal sinks to the earth with bright gobs of blood falling on earth. The animal that danced along with the ladies keeping perfect timing is betrayed in the most dread way possible. His sacrifice is deemed inevitable for the survival of the human race. Where his blood falls there “corn will sprout green and gold.” A fertility ritual performed to ensure the survival of mankind.

The I-speaker walks home feeling “a little sick” and “headachey” and rinses her clothes “in a spring that flows, pure and cold” only to turn momentarily a little rusty from the blood that runs from the garment and soon the water runs “clear again.” The I-speaker would perhaps be haunted by the memory of the slaughter of the innocent animal and like Lady Macbeth may look at her soiled hands and utter with dismay “Not all the perfumes of Arabia will sweeten this little palm.”

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