

Diaspora and Ecclesiastical Dualism in the Works of Anne Bradstreet

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Abstract

The following article examines different aspects of some of the poems by Anne Bradstreet, the first American poet whose verses are still commemorated for their versatility, vibrant prosody and for the special reason that her poems make frequent references to the European immigrants who settled down on the soils of the New World several centuries ago and shaped up today's America. The political and religious rifts that imbalanced the civil circumstances in England and in some other European countries during 17th century have also been illustrated in her poems in a moving style. Anne Bradstreet's poetry speaks of her dreams, her trepidations and her bifurcated approach to Christianity. She moved back and forth between her motherland and the New World through her poems which is how her poetry resonates with a noteworthy rhapsody of diasporic hope and dismay. A good number of poems by Anne Bradstreet expose her dualistic mindset regarding life, death, God, sin and retribution and these enigmatic points have provoked a variegated range of opinions among scholars about her poetic image over last hundreds of years.

Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) has been all along valued by connoisseurs as the first woman to be taken for granted as a full-fledged New World poet. She is often appraised as the pioneer of American verses. Being a woman, Anne Bradstreet capped off a colossal job by becoming a female poet in America during 17th century when the founding fathers of America like Jonathan Edwards, Cotton Mather and William Bradford wholeheartedly intended to transform the New World into a theocratic state on the basis of Biblical guidelines. Theology had an extremely strong influence over the American writings of that time most of which sounded like religious sermons. An all out submission to Biblical verses was a Puritanic prerequisite of that time. Christianity and the Holy Scriptures were the only tools to keep the European migrants consolidated under one umbrella in the New World—the Puritanic leaders and theologians firmly believed in this ecclesiastically ordered governing policy, as emphasized by Cotton Mather in his evidential and voluminous book *Magnalia Christi Americana* (207). So, Anne Bradstreet's dream to become a poet and to make it true under conservative circumstances was certainly a mammoth task to implement. Her volume of poetry *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* incurred a great deal of attention when it was first published in London in 1650. Eighty years after its publication it was enlisted by William London in his *A Catalogue of the Most Vendible Books in England* and George III was reported to have had the volume in his personal collection. Anne Bradstreet's poems have successfully stood the test of time over last several centuries and she is still regarded as one of the frontline poets of America dating back to its infantile days.

Anne Dudley Bradstreet was a self-schooled woman. She had never been to any academic institution. However, she gathered a broad range of learning from her father Thomas Dudley, who

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was an omnivorous reader. While Anne Bradstreet was a young girl, she perused works by Homer, Seneca, Virgil, Plutarch, John Milton and some more eminent litterateurs. In 1628 Anne Bradstreet got married to Simon Bradstreet, who used to assist her father in his official chores. She remained in wedlock with him until her death on 16th September 1672. Anne Bradstreet immigrated to the New World with her husband and parents in 1630 like many other Europeans who migrated there and civilized present day America.

After a tough three-month long sea voyage, their ship *Arbella* reached Salem, Massachusetts on 22nd July 1630. Bedraggled by sickness, lack of food and poor living conditions of Massachusetts Bay Colony, Anne Bradstreet expressed her anguish in some of her poems at the inhospitable plight of the colony. However, later on she adapted to the wilderness, shortcomings and hardships of that place and recognized the authority of the Puritanic society of that time, a diasporic stream that is recurrently noted in many of her poems. In literary terms, diaspora refers to the migration of people from their motherland to other countries for political, religious, economic or other reasons. She remained rather ambiguous about some core religious issues like redemption and piety for the rest of her life. From this point of view, a tint of agnosticism can be speculated about the religious stance of Anne Bradstreet. Agnosticism had been widely prevalent in the west in the 17th century. To interpret a couple of lines from the book titled *In God We Doubt: Confessions of a Failed Atheist* by John Humphrys, agnostics support the notion that demystifying the riddles about life hereafter and God's existence is far beyond the capability of mankind (66).

Even though Anne Bradstreet had eight children between the years spanning from 1633 till 1652, which meant that her domestic liabilities were highly strenuous, she wrote poetry with a fervent commitment to the art of writing. If scrutinized carefully, her verses reflect the religious and emotional dichotomy she experienced simultaneously as a female poet and as a Puritan. Throughout her life Anne Bradstreet remained preoccupied with binary opposites like sin and salvation, vice and virtue, hope and despair, death and immortality. As a Puritan she had a long struggle to curtail her attachment to this world, but as a woman she felt more profoundly inclined to her husband, her children and to her community rather than to God.

Anne Bradstreet's earliest poem, "Upon a Fit of Sickness" written by her when she was nineteen, seems pretty close to the traditional beliefs of the Puritans — the plainness and brevity of life, the certainty of death and the hope for deliverance:

O Bubble blast, how long can'st last?
That always art a breaking,
No sooner blown, but dead and gone,
Ev'n as a word that's speaking.
O whil'st I live, this grace me give,
I doing good may be,
Then death's arrest I shall count best,
Because it's thy decree. (17—24)

Written in the form of a ballad, the above poem illustrates a thematic stream that refers to the transience of earthly experience which underscores the divine imperative to carry out God's commandments. Although this poem is an endeavour in piety, it bears a subtle split or vagueness between the flesh and the spirit—an ecclesiastical aporia that further expanded as Anne Bradstreet grew up, as observed by Charlotte Gordon in her book *Mistress Bradstreet: The Untold Life of America's First Poet* (83). The intensity of her double-bind between love for this world and her thirst for a blithe, eternal life is expressed in her poem "Contemplations":

Then higher on the glistening Sun I gaz'd
Whose beams was shaded by the leavie Tree,
The more I look'd, the more I grew amaz'd
And softly said, what glory's like to thee?
Soul of this world, this Universes Eye,
No wonder, some made thee a Deity:
Had I not better known, (alas) the same had I. (23—29)

Even though this lyrical, exquisitely articulated poem concludes with the poet's proclamation of faith in afterlife, her faith gets paradoxically clouded when she is found plunging herself into the charms of earthly life, another example of her ecclesiastical dualism. This poem and some other poems by Anne Bradstreet sketch the fact that she committed herself to the religious concept of salvation because she loved her life on earth. Her hope for heaven was an expression of her desire to live forever rather than a willingness to chuck away all worldly pursuits. In her view, the idea of heaven promised the elongation of mundane joys, rather than an abandonment of the amusements she enjoyed during her lifetime. Actually it's difficult to keep Anne Bradstreet confined within the picket fences of just one religious standpoint. Earlier on we found her somewhat similar to agnosticism. But her idea of heaven makes her look a little like the stalwarts of Jehovah's Witnesses. To paraphrase a few lines from David A. Reed's book *Blood on the Altar*, Jehovah's Witnesses belong to a certain sect of Christianity the followers of which don't believe in the existence of hell (107). Anne Bradstreet's elated lyrics at times move towards an effort to eradicate the fear of hellfire and to ignite hope in the minds of her readers about the divine pledge of forgiveness.

Puritanic beliefs like the short span of life on earth, death, Judgement Day, profanity of this world--these eschatological issues were addressed by Emily Dickinson in some of her poems. There is a particular graveyard sensibility in Dickinson's verses. The grave is the focal point of Dickinson's consciousness. By referring to graveyard matters, Emily Dickinson in one way or another hints at the core ideas upheld by her Puritanic ancestors, the founding fathers of New England. The inevitability of death and belief in afterlife ignites her imagination which is how she stood on equal grounds with the theologians that preached Christianity in a Puritanically fashioned way to the earlier inhabitants of New England. So, a resemblance is found between Emily Dickinson and Anne Bradstreet in terms of the thematic points of some of their verses that refer to Puritanism and to the idea of God. Let's take a look at a few lines from Emily Dickinson's poem "A Death Blow is a Life Blow to Some":

A Death blow is a Life blow to Some
 Who till they died, did not alive become—
 Who had they lived, had died but when
 They died, Vitality begun. (1--4)

The above lines reflect a fundamental paradox that had been the tenor of many New England Puritan sermons: this life means death and this death ushers us into another real life which is imperishable and endless, according to an appraisal of the poem in *Launched into Eternity* by Masud Mahmood (59). Citing death as another life is a categorical reference to resurrection, a thematic stream that we find in a good number of poems by Anne Bradstreet too.

Anne Bradstreet had a high honour for her father for the encouragement she had received from him to write poems. Nevertheless, she wrote about the ailments and diasporic pangs that got hold of her and her children during the initial days of their settlement in America. Let's take a look at the following lines from her poem "Of the Four Ages of Man":

What gripes of wind my infancy did pain,
 What tortures I in breeding teeth sustain?
 What crudities my stomach cold has bred,
 Whence vomits, flux, and worms have issued? (131—134)

The above words wriggle with a lurid expression of Anne Bradstreet's sufferings caused by various diseases that imperilled her, her family as well as her fellow immigrants while they were combating to make things congenial in the middle of the alien environment of the New World.

In "A Dialogue between Old England and New," Anne Bradstreet spoke of the political and religious tussles that engulfed England during 17th century as a result of which the Puritans moved away from their home country. The poem versifies a cluster of dialogues exchanged between mother England and her daughter New England through a poignant work of personification. The compassionate words of the poem reveal Anne Bradstreet's deep bonds with her motherland and show how upset she was by the disputes and losses of lives caused by the political hazards of England during that time. As Old England's remorse implies, the perilous impact of the civil disorder of England during 17th century on human life was very painful to Anne Bradstreet:

O pity me in this sad perturbation,
 My plundered Towers, my houses devastation,
 My weeping Virgins and my young men slain;
 My wealthy trading fall'n, my dearth of grain. (196—199)

In this poem, Anne Bradstreet's own values are found emerging. There is virtually no imitation of the long-standing patriarch model of poetry and there is a more explicit exposure of the poet's

own feelings, as visualized by Charlotte Gordon in *Mistress Bradstreet: The Untold Life of America's First Poet* (129). As Anne Bradstreet obtained experience and became emboldened with confidence, she relied less on the style established by previous mentors and counted more on her own individual poetic qualities. From this angle, we can call Anne Bradstreet a visionary. This idea of individualism revived in America during 19th century through the advent of American Transcendental Movement.

Anne Bradstreet had a patriotic mind. Her heart bled while civil strife was tearing her motherland apart. She put forward her grief through her poems at the political infirmity of England during her era while she was a young woman. On the other hand, she spared no pains to get on equal terms with the norms and principles of the New World after migrating there. The religious conflicts that persuaded the Puritans to leave England remind us of the dispersion of the Jews from their homeland for similar reasons as portrayed by Peter Danielson in his best-known novel *The Shepherd Kings*. An identical jingle of diaspora rings throughout the stories told by Khaled Hosseini in his masterpieces *And the Mountains Echoed* as well as *The Kite Runner*. Moreover, Anne Bradstreet wrote some poems about the clashes that often took place in New England between the colonists and the Red Indians. These bloody confrontations developed the storyline of James Fenimore Cooper's most celebrated novel *The Last of the Mohicans*. Reuben Post Halleck referred to James Fenimore Cooper as the precursor of American fiction (177). Most of the novels by James Fenimore Cooper narrate the thrilling and savage incidents that marked the initial days of colonialism in America.

On equal terms with the form of diaspora we come across in Anne Bradstreet's verses, a conspicuously notable diasporic strain is found in the following lines from Derek Walcott's poem "A Far Cry from Africa":

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live? (27--34)

The lines extracted above show the inner torment of the poet caused by his divided selfhood, a diasporic strain that splits him up in between his African origin and his present identity as an English-speaking bard living overseas. This torturous ambivalence about one's identity is one of the pivotal themes of diasporic literature, as traced in most of the references made above.

Anne Bradstreet paved the way for American poetry for the first time back in 17th century. It would not be an overstatement to call her the mother of American verses. Her invaluable works acted as an inspiration for her successors as far as American literature is concerned. In fact female American poets and authors of later centuries like Emily Dickinson, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Margaret Fuller and Harriet Beecher Stowe moved ahead by carrying on the legacy left behind by

Anne Bradstreet. Anne Bradstreet is an immortal poet. Any discourse on American literature would remain obscure without recalling her glorious name.

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