

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 13 : 2 February 2013

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

Assistant Managing Editor: Swarna Thirumalai, M.A.

Subjugation of Women in Robert Browning's Selected Poems

A. Chandra Bose, Ph.D.



Robert Browning 1812-1889

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Browning

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

A. Chandra Bose, Ph.D.

Subjugation of Women in Robert Browning's Selected Poems

Abstract

This paper aims at providing an evidence of subjugation of women in the England of the Victorian period. Many writers have been exposing mistreatment of women through their writings from the past to the present day. Robert Browning is one among those who highlights the scenario of killing women for possessive passions and social status. It is found that the two poems of Robert Browning “My Last Duchess” and “Prophyria’s Lover” had given similar message to the reader. The poet portrays how two innocent women are killed and strangled by two different men in order to control the women. It is a miserable fact that the idea of subjugation of women still continues in this world.

Browning – A Victorian Poet, Representing Real Nature of Men and Women

Robert Browning is one the greatest poets of the Victorian era. He employs dramatic monologue as a powerful tool to explain some historical happenings and also present ordinary things in a dramatic way. He takes up real characters to represent real nature of men and women. He picks up characters from all varieties of social strata such as cowards, rogues, scholars, artists, cheats, murderers, saints etc... Themes of his poems are love, excessive love, art, artistic beauty, religion, philosophy, nature and human nature and so on.

Different Types of Women in Browning’s Poems

Though Browning handles wide range of characters and themes he portrays different types of women in his poems. This paper tries to focus on two of his poems (“*My Last Duchess*”, “*Prophyria’s Lover*”) and study how women characters are subjugated by men.

Browning’s ladies hail from various backgrounds such as Duchess (wife of Duke of Ferrara), a rich and socially empowered girl (Prophyria), Lucrezia (a great painter’s wife) Miranda, a daughter of Prospero (*Caliban Upon Setebos*) a dead young girl Evelyn Hope (*Evelyn Hope*) and an ordinary girl (*The last Ride Together*) . Among these six women, two of them are killed by their husband and lover, respectively. It is to be noted that women from socially well off families are murdered and others from ordinary families are not persecuted by their near and dear ones.

Stopping the Abuse of Women

Lineszy-Overton says “Victorian men’s obsession with domination, while also showing that it takes both sexes to stop the abuse of women in the Victorian period. Men in this period look at their wives only to find a reflection of themselves”. (1) “My Last Duchess” is a dramatic monologue which deals with the dispirited Duke who kills his wife in order to gain control over her. He does not give any chance to the Duchess through which she may clarify herself.

In “Porphyria’s Lover” the abnormal lover strangles Porphyria without her knowledge in order to keep her forever. These two ladies (Duchess and Porphyria) are innocent. The problem with them is their social status and the possessiveness of their lovers. Lineszy-Overton writes “While Duchess was alive, the Duke wanted to control her so much that his happiness depended on the Duchess conforming to his will. The Duke wants to rule the Duchess in every way. The Duke wanted her smiles, laughter, and joy to be directed only toward him”(3). Likewise, In “Porphyria’s Lover” the lover wants to possess her always and that’s why he killed and stayed with her.

Honor Killing

Browning’s “My Last Duchess” is a clear example of honor killing in order to maintain the so called social status. The Duchess does nothing wrong, she is very simple and gives respect to each and everyone in the same manner. She breaks social barriers and treats all human beings equally. That hurts the Duke, and he gives orders to finish her off. Browning writes succinctly “I gave commands: Then all smiles stopped together, There she stands As if alive” (45-47). The Duke is a sadist; he wants the Duchess’s portrait to be hung on the wall of his palace in order to show his artistic taste and also to ascertain so-called moral values in the Victorian era. Browning clearly indicates the possessive madness of the Duke:

I said

“Fra pandolf” by design, for never read

Strangers like you that pictured countenance,

The depth and passion of its earnest glance,

But to myself they turned (since none puts by

The curtain I have drawn for you, but I) (5-10)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

A. Chandra Bose, Ph.D.

Subjugation of Women in Robert Browning’s Selected Poems

Clever Arrangement to Dominate

The Duke selects a monk to draw the portrait of Duchess. He feels that a monk won't enjoy the beauty of the Duchess while painting and also he gave him only a day for doing that. The poet exposes the nature of the Duke who does these things in order to control his wife after her demise. The Duke wants to control not only the late Duchess but also the future wife. He explains everything to the envoy whose master's daughter is going to be the next Duchess.

Browning symbolically represents the behavior of the Duke through the art work depicting Neptune taming a sea horse that is hanging on the wall in the palace of the Duke. From this the reader can understand the mindset of the Duke and his ill-treatment of women. This poem understandably depicts how women suffered and were suppressed by the tyrant monarch, and arrogant men in the Victorian period. Further, Melissa explains "The feminine voice in the Victorian poetry is often overshadowed by male authors' presence coming through in word choice and scenario. All though these authors attempt to express the desires and emotions of their female characters, their words often do not convince and more often not, produce voices of weak women" (1).

Dramatic Monologue on Social Barriers

"Porphyria's Lover" is a short dramatic monologue written by Browning where he introduces the young, charming Porphyria, estranged from her lover because of social barriers, ranks and birth, has run away from her house. She is an innocent and plain lady. She overcomes all the hurdles in front of her in order to reach her pinnacle of pure love. She expresses her sweet love towards the lover. Browning describes the expressions of Porphyria when she enters the room of her lover. He writes:

She shut the cold out and the storm,
And kneeled and made the cheerless grate
Blaze up, and all the cottage warm;
Which done, she rose, and from her form
Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl,
And laid her soiled gloves by, untied

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

A. Chandra Bose, Ph.D.

Subjugation of Women in Robert Browning's Selected Poems

Her hat and let the damp hair fall,
And, last, she sat down by my side
And called me. (7-16)

These lines of Browning explain the thirst for love and her yearning over her lover. She comes in from the stormy and rainy night to confirm her pure love to her lover who is waiting for her reply for a long time. The poet clearly describes the happy mood of the lover who receives the long-awaited green signal from Porphyria. The delay is not because of her, it is because of social setup in which she lives. Moreover, she cannot control her feelings and emotions regarding him any longer. At one point of time, she takes a firm decision to stay with him and enjoy his love when there is a function at her house. Browning describes that blissful moment of her lover's life when she accepts his love:

... I looked up at her eyes
Happy and proud; at last I knew
Porphyria worshiped me: surprise
Made my heart swell, and still it grew
While I debated what to do.
That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
Perfectly pure and good... (31-36)

Lover's Property

The lover feels that at the moment, she declares her love to him, she is his property. She is so beautiful, full of grace and virginal innocence. These qualities would have probably tempted him not to leave her. Further, he was waiting for such a great occasion to meet Porphyria and also make love. Porphyria's lover is a madman so he takes a mad decision in order to make her his own forever. Gridley says that "the lover in Browning's poem is as removed from the normal world as were those isolated madmen whom Gericault studied and painted in the 1820s" (56). The lover madly decides to release Porphyria from the hurdles of social barriers by strangulating her. He never feels that it is a crime rather he justifies it as "No pain felt she; / I am sure she felt no pain" (41-42). The lover has proudly revealed himself as a successful

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

A. Chandra Bose, Ph.D.

Subjugation of Women in Robert Browning's Selected Poems

murderer who has killed without giving pain to the dear one. Browning describes the horrible lunatic attitude of the speaker:

I warily oped her lids: again
Laughed the blue eyes without a stain.
And I untightened next the tress
About her neck; her cheek once more
Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss: (44-48)

Possession Forever – Live or Dead

From these lines, the reader can understand how Porphyria's dead body is mistreated by her lover in order to possess her forever. Gridley critically views that "the lover's mind must be trapped within the memory of that; in the same he hoped to stop time and preserve forever the movement of love Porphyria showed him" (57). Killing a person is not allowed to preserve the last memory of that person. So at the end of the poem, Browning indicates that the lover is waiting for God's judgment for his sin.

Ian Jack says "It is impossible to think of "My Last Duchess" without remembering the character of the speaker whose arrogant pride and jealousy are so brilliantly evoked" (93). Likewise, In "Porphyria's Lover" Browning has portrayed an abnormal, psychologically disordered murderer who thinks that his lover should not belong to anybody else. Both the Duke in "My Last Duchess" and the lover in "Porphyria's Lover" have the same crazy inclination that they should possess women either alive or dead. These two male characters are not ready to heed their ladies' opinions or wishes.

In "My Last Duchess" the Duke never tries to listen to her or he is not able to tolerate the social behavior of the Duchess. In this matter, the Duke is a man of failure, and in order to hide his inability; he kills his wife and hangs the portrait of her on the wall to threaten the future Duchess in the name of moral code. Melissa writes " throughout the poem, the Duke speaks for the late Duchess, and there is no way that she can defend herself against his accusations and description of her because she is not present to speak for herself"(1). In "Porphyria's Lover" the lover does not have the courage to face the problems of social obstacles and so, he strangles his lover.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

A. Chandra Bose, Ph.D.

Subjugation of Women in Robert Browning's Selected Poems

Play Things and Sexual Objects

From these two poems, Browning clearly exhibits the attitude of men in the Victorian society. Women are treated as play things and sexual objects of men. These two poems do not record the voices of the women folk and also their sighs were muted by the poet. It seems that women were not given chance to express their wishes and desires. Again Melissa says “Browning continues the theme of men trying to possess women as though these women are objects without souls, personalities or thoughts of their own” (2). However, the possessiveness, jealousy and honor- killing are expressed by the poet in these two poems. The sad fact is that the victims are not men but women. Honor-killing is a social disease which prevails all over the world even in the developed nations.

=====

Work Cited

Browning, Robert. “My Last Duchess.” The Oxford Anthology of English Literature. Ed. Frank Kermode, ed al Vol:II. London: OUP,1967.Print.

---. “Porphyria’s Lover” Poem Hunter.com. No.105. 1st Aug.2012.

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/porphyria-s-lover/>

Gridly E, Roy. Browning. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1972. Print.

Jake, Ian. Robert Browning’s Major Poetry. Oxford University Press: OUP, 1973. Print.

Melissa E, Buron. “The feminine Voices and Feminine Presence in Nineteenth- Century Poetry”.

Literature, History & Culture in the age of Victoria. No. English 151 (2003 No. English 151 (2003). 20 Aug.2012.

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/rb/buron14.html>

=====

A. Chandra Bose, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of English
The Madura College (Autonomous)
Madurai 625011
Tamilnadu
India
boseac@gmail.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

A. Chandra Bose, Ph.D.

Subjugation of Women in Robert Browning’s Selected Poems