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Strangling of the Female Selves : A Study of Two Poems By Robert Browning

Abstract- Women in the Victorian society underwent an intense repression in the male dominated society and this is very often reflected in most of the Victorian literary outputs. Prohibition, restriction in the guise of morality imprisoned the females in the dark corner of society. Robert Browning, one of the eminent poets of the Victorian age, ventured to violate this tradition of suppressed women in his poetry and let them enjoy their liberty repudiating the patriarchal dominance. His women were made to challenge patriarchal authority and find their deliverance in their own way. This paper seeks to focus on two of Browning's poems "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover" from the collection "Dramatic Lyrics" to show how the women were subdued by the male authority and how they resisted this repression subverting the traditional patriarchal power structure.

Key words-Patriarchy; Dominance; Power; Authority; Females; Resistance.

The moral rigidity of Victorian age resulted in the brutal suppression of the females who were expected to be satisfied with a secondary or peripheral position in the social hierarchy in contrast to male who held the central position. Robert Browning, who was noted chiefly for his mastery in dramatic monologue, showed his excellence in many of his love poems and breaking the traditional pattern of man woman relationship, there he liked to probe into the psychological struggle of the characters. Feeling the warmth of the faint ray of modernity, Browning supported the fulfilment of female desire rather than in the preservation of the

domestic proprieties. The women of his poems are all individualistic in nature- each is distinct from others. Coming out of the stereotypical images of womanhood, Browning's women present themselves as 'new' and move one step forward to combat patriarchal power authority.

The poem "My last Duchess" begins as the duke has just pulled back a curtain to reveal to the envoy the portrait of his last duchess. The portrait was very conscientiously painted by Fra Pandolf, a monk and painter whom the speaker believes to have captured the singularity of the duchess's glance. The duke informs that his former wife's deep and passionate glance was not solely reserved for her husband as she was very happy and kind to every smallest offerings of common people. In this way Duke's genteel musings give way to a diatribe on his duchess's disgraceful behaviour: he claims she flirted with everyone defying his status and "gift of a nine-hundred-years- old name."¹ . As his monologue continues, the reader realizes with ever-more chilling certainty that the Duke in fact caused the duchess's early demise having failed to tolerate her incorrigible insolence- "[he] gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together."² But the dispassionate duke leaves no time for brooding and returns to the business at hand to prepare for his next marriage . He doesn't hesitate to inform the envoy that he expects a handsome dowry from his count along with his count's beautiful daughter as his bride.

Women in patriarchal society are very often treated as commodity. The picture of the duchess is kept as art -object in duke's house which is an emblem of duke's social status and obviously the duke's second marriage alliance is also based on money as his would be bride would have to satisfy him with a good amount of money to be welcomed as his duchess. According to Luce Irigaray, social order determines sexual order. In patriarchal society, the males are the "producer subjects and agents of exchange" and the females are the "commodities" .³

In this society “woman exists only as an occasion for mediation, transaction, transition, transference, between man and his fellow man, indeed between man and himself”⁴.

But the duke who seems to be so authoritative and powerful, is, in fact, stands in a very insecure and unstable position. Murder was indispensable for him to stop the smile of his first duchess as it was a smile of defiance towards his superfluous male ego. The smile and the duchess had to be eliminated as they possessed the element of disruption which could dismantle patriarchal power structure carefully built by the Duke to secure his patriarchal kingdom.

“Victorians in their regard for social stability endeavoured to safeguard themselves against its disruptive power behind an elaborate system of convention. A double standard of conduct was in force for the sexes, and the family stood as the central support to the entire social fabric.”⁵

But his temporary relief turns into life long irritation as his dead wife smiles ‘as if alive’⁶ in the picture. Her ‘depth’ and ‘passionate gaze’⁷ staggers his voice when he questions “How such a glance come there”⁸ The dead duchess cosily resides in her portrait and reminds us of her seditious presence through her husband’s anxious murmurings.

In the article “Men of Blood,” author Carter J. Wood acknowledges that the analyses of Victorian violence necessitate an understanding of the time period’s “constructions of dutiful femininity that excused men’s ‘disciplinary’ violence and an all-male judiciary that stood idly by or even actively supported male household dominance”⁹. To be sure, the Victorian gender ideology that held women in a passive and submissive role, and assumed men having the authority to keep women in this role via disciplinary violence, is the key component of understanding the Poem “My Last Duchess”.

In Victorian times, “women came to be seen as more moral and vulnerable while men were perceived as more dangerous, more than ever in need of external disciplines and, most of all, self-discipline” **10**

Yet the duchess is clearly outside of the “moral and vulnerable”**11** space Victorian women were expected to occupy. By murdering the duchess, the duke punishes her for her sexual promiscuity (assumed by the duke) – for which the culture would have condemned her – and in doing so aligns himself with the Victorian masculine model of a “dangerous”**12** man who lacks control. In this sense, duchess’s death affirms the authority of the state.

This is why the duke goes to marry again probably to embalm his bruised ego. This time he wants keep his harness tight from the beginning so that the element of disruption can't be brought forth again. The anxious duke is forewarning his would be duchess against insolence so that she can't dare to defy him. But the new duchess’s jeering is heard from behind the curtain as she has brought the duke down to the position of an agitated insecure husband who is trembled at the fear of losing his authority. The possibility of her insurgence is echoed in the duke’s anxious warning to her before marriage.

“Notice Neptune, though taming a horse, though a rarity, which claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me”.**13**

The next poem “Porphyria’s lover” begins in a stormy night when the agitated lover was waiting in a melancholic mood for his beloved Porphyria to come. When we all are expecting that Porphyria may not come and thus the poem will be another story of a frustrating lover, Porphyria arrives defying the strictures of the society. Tending the fire of the cottage, Porphyria leans against her lover and professes her love for him.

But that her expression proves her worship for the lover fuelled the lover's pride. Trying to preserve the moment forever he strangles his beloved to death with her own hair so that she can't again give away to social prohibition. He assures his reader that she died a painless death and then begins to play with her corpse and spends the entire night like a romantic couple.

But this passionate lover from the very beginning was doubtful of his beloved which is clear from his description of his beloved. He doesn't like her hesitant mood while acknowledging her love for him.

Too weak, for all her heart's endeavor,
 To set its struggling passion free
 From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
 And give herself to me forever .**14**

The feminist scholars often revolt against this stereotypical presentation of female gender and its motif. According to Berger , "Women are depicted in a different way to men- not because the feminine is different from the masculine- but because the ideal spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the women is designed to flatter him.**15** (Berger, 1972).

A simple reading may consider Browning's narrator as mentally unstable or "insane",**16** which allows him commit crazed criminal act of murdering his beloved. (Ross, 2002)But a close reading reveals it a far more complicated piece than a basic tale of deranged man who commits a deranged act.

Browning makes it clear that 'power' in "Porphyria's lovers" is divided along the lines of gender.

The title of the poem “Porphyria’s Lover” portrays that this division is an unconventional one, and therefore problematic. The poem’s title is not, “My Lover, Porphyria,” but rather, “Porphyria’s Lover.” This difference is significant for two main reasons. First, a title such as “My Lover, Porphyria” would be in keeping with the first-person point of view through which the poem is narrated. The title, “Porphyria’s Lover” oddly references the first person narrator in a third-person point of view. While this may possibly help communicate to the readers that the poem is written in the form of a dramatic monologue, it also resonates with the theory that one of the poem’s major themes is the speaker’s lost manhood. The title makes him nameless. And, by both naming Porphyria and giving her name precedence, the title suggests that the speaker is a person whose existence is qualified by a more important person with whom he is associated. Browning’s choice to devalue the speaker in the title foreshadows the crucial power struggle that serves as the poem’s axis. Moreover, the title positions Porphyria in an ownership role over her lover. This is an immediate suggestion of the imbalanced (or irregular) power structure that the rest of the poem expands upon.

Even without the evidence of the poem’s title, Porphyria’s supremacy over her lover is unmistakable. Porphyria glides into the speaker’s cottage where he had been sitting. The initial position hints to their position of power. She had the freedom of movement while the lover remains stationary. Catherine Maxwell connects Porphyria’s physical movement with her personal power observing that the lover “picture[s]... her as [a] free agent” and that he is also “resent[ful] of her autonomy” 17.

And this resentment comes from the Victorian concept of masculinity which held that autonomy was reserved for men, not for women.

Once Porphyria is inside the room, her mobility as a signifier of control becomes more evident. As Maxwell comments, “Porphyria enters the poem as the dominant partner, the maker and doer, while her sullen lover is silent and recalcitrantly passive”.¹⁸

The speaker’s position makes him completely inert, being manipulated by Porphyria. It is she who plays the dominant role- reserved in the Victorian gender dynamics for male, while the lover is in a passive position- believed by Victorian to be the role of women.

Another remarkable feature is their disproportionate ability to speak. The speaker says nothing in the monologue and when Porphyria “called” him, but, “no voice replied” to .¹⁹. (Browning, 1842)

There is a noticeable detachment in this expression; the lover does not own his voice, and the obvious absence of both his voice and his ownership of that voice suggests a deeper lack of presence, or even identity. Although Porphyria is never explicitly quoted in the text, in addition to “call[ing]” out, the speaker mentions that she “murmur[s] how much she loves [him]”²⁰

These attributes of power – that Victorians reserved for men- are directed through Porphyria’s murder. The speaker perceives murder as a means to obtain his authority and in doing so affirms his own masculinity. For instance, the very moment when the lover claims Porphyria is “mine, mine”²¹ he is prompted to kill her in order to preserve the moment, in order to endorse this ownership. Thus, in claiming possession over his beloved, the speaker simultaneously reclaims his masculine identity, and thereby Porphyria’s murder is configured as an act induced by concepts of gender and power, not by insanity. In exerting physical force he tries to inflict his own physical autonomy. The speaker tries to animate her after death and tries to repositioning them as they were before only in the correct gender role- powerful man, and powerless woman.

Concluding with a reference to “God”²² the speaker finishes the patriarchal power hierarchy of citizen, government, and God. The presence of the traditional hierarchy strengthens the sense that this is an act, ultimately, motivated by power. The mention of “God” additionally emphasizes the issues of morality and virtue. This state is in accordance with God, and therefore God voices no objections. The power of both is undeniable, and is maintained by the justice of Porphyria’s death.

Conclusion-What began as a simple love poem has revealed itself to be much more than simple and about far more than this. Browning’s attempt to subvert the prevalent gender discrimination has been successfully executed through these two poems. Though the explicit resistance is yet to be acknowledged, it definitely foreshadows the gender question of the ages to come.

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