

---

**Negetion of the Voice-‘Other’:  
A Free Thinking of Browning’s Poems in the Context of Suppression of the Second Sex**

**Shibajyoti Karmakar,**  
*Asst. Teacher, Barabendya Vivekananda High School,  
Bankura*

**Abstract:** My present paper brings out how the feminine voice is suppressed in most of the poems of Robert Browning. The present article will highlight those poems where it was found that the women are subjugated and has not given the due importance which they earnestly deserve.

**Keywords-** Suppression, Oppression, patriarchal, Domination, Mutual Cooperation.

---

Robert Browning’s poems are full of Renaissance vigour of free will but his poems lack the worshipping of intellectual beauty of lady love. Beloveds in Browning’s poem are always the ‘other’ of their lovers. They are not given any Foucauldian power of existence but are represented as silent and passive listeners. They are treated as mere objects of the male partner having no individual identity. This ‘other’ is not always beloved as female but in Browning’s thought they are eccentric, grotesque and fantastic. Browning has represented women as ‘other’ to male. In a sense we can say that Browning’s representation of women is not natural. The representation of the position of women of Browning is the focal point of this paper as well as Browning’s poems are to be X-rayed in the feminist perspectives. The females are considered as the ‘other’ and not the main stream of society in the Lacanian and Freudian concept of ‘lack’. But the post structuralism has given a new emphasis to the ‘other’ transferring their position from the second to the first.

Feminism demands restoration of women in all fields of study, Knowledge and social justice. Simon de Beauvoir, the French existential philosopher as well as a feminist in her *The Second Sex* has said that ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’. *The Subjugation of Women* by John Stuart Mill, *The Room of One’s Own* by Virginia Woolf, *Vindication of the Rights of Women* by Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Second Sex* by Simon de Beauvoir and *Mad women in the Attic* by Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert- are some books which deal with the feminist perspectives and the position of women in the society. The first phase of feminism demands educational opportunity and social justice for women. But the second phase is overtly political which demands equal pay for equal works. Beauvoir has analysed why women are considered as the second claim citizen or the second sex and she is hostile to Freudian and Lacanian concept. Phallogocentric criticism deals with the woman as the reader of male text and how women are represented by male authors. Whereas gynocriticism propounded by

Elaine Showalter, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous considers women as the writer and they should write experiences of their life. French feminists are also hostile against Freudian and Lacanian concept of ‘penis envy’, ‘Castration effect’ and ‘Oedipus complex’ and they have talked of “écriture writing”, i.e. women language which will be rhythmic, emotional and different from man’s language. These are some feminist issues which are related to feminism and its theoretical aspects. Feminism, the theoretical tool wants to give a kind of new voice in this postmodern era. The silence, passive, the oppressed the marginal section of the society is given a kind of position side by side with the male by this feminist outlook. Some of the poems of Browning’s deals with such kind of marginal position of the women and therefore they are kept under surveillance by the male dominated society. The psychoanalytic theory brings out such kind of inner recess of the female. Browning’s poems are to be questioned in the perspective of these feminist issues.

The title of Browning’s book *Men and Women* (1855) undoubtedly refers to the man woman relationship in his poetry. The title is, to some extent, misleading because the male speaker in most of his poetry dominates over the female one. The women appear only in the speech of the male protagonists or as silent listeners. But the use of conjunction ‘and’ in the title suggests an equality of sexes. However, the distinction again comes when ‘man’ is mentioned first and the word ‘women’ comes after ‘men’. Had the title been ‘women and men’, Browning would certainly become liberal. Actually in Browning’s poetry, women are not given any voice. This inequality between sexes is obvious not only in the title of the collection but it occurs in most of Browning’s poems.

Browning’s famous poem *My Last Duchess* is about a Duke who has killed his wife as he is not at all pleased with her conduct. The age old tradition-that men should control and guide women is obviously reflected here. When the Duke feels that he is losing the control over the Duchess, he ordered to murder her and ‘and all smiles

stopped’. Prior to that, what were the faults of the Duchess? A male dominated society will find certain loopholes in the character of the Duchess. At first to please the Duke, the Duchess did not forsake her independence and identity. When the Duke speaks of the Duchess, he says,

“...She had

A heart- how shall I say?- too soon made glad

Too easily impressed;” (*My Last Duchess*,21-23)

One can easily point out that these words indicate the quality of a young child who can be easily made glad as well as impressed. The Duke means to say that the Duchess is too innocent and childlike who has not the ability to make difference between ordinary and extraordinary. Again the Duke wanted to dominate over her in many ways. He wanted her smiles, laughter, and joy to be directed only towards him. But the Duchess’s friendly personality was disliked by the Duke so much so that he was disgusted totally-

“...Sir ’twas not

Her Husband’s presence only, called that spot

Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek” (*My Last Duchess*,13-15)

According to the Duke, the Duchess should be joyous only with the presence of him and she should not be glad in the presence of other and this is nothing but over possessiveness of women by the patriarchal society.

In the poem “Porphyria’s Lover” the inferiority of women is well expressed by the speech of Porphyria’s lover in the following manner:

“Murmuring how she loved me—

Too weak....” (*Porphyria’s Lover*, 21-22)

Even- “Porphyria worshipped me” brings the domination of the lover over Porphyria. It is very easy to kill a woman like Porphyria by her lover and the innocent is murdered without any hesitation. Here the sense of over possessiveness of the lover is well expressed. The ego of the lover has come out at the end of the poem—

“That moment she was mine,mine,fair,

Perfectly pure and good:” (*Porphyria’s Lover*, 36-37)

Browning shows how man only thinks of what he wants and not what she wants. However the lover tries to justify that it was Porphyria’s own will to

be killed this way and that he merely granted her wish but the truth is clear to all. Actually it is the male patriarchal society which tries to create the fate of the female.

In the poem “The Laboratory”, the beloved comes to have poison to kill her lover who had cheated her and was engaged with another lady. Browning has shown us how in a male dominated society, it is the woman who becomes the victim of the whimsical mind of the male.

In “Andrea Del Sarto” the concept of mutual co-operation and mutual understanding is well expressed. Andrea Del Sarto is able to be a great painter if he gets the help of his beloved i.e. his wife Lucrezia. Hence the role of Lucrezia is too much important in the context of the progress of Andrea Del Sarto-

“For Leonard,Rafeal,Angolo and me

To cover—the three first without a wife,

While I have mine!” (*Andrea Del Sarto*,63-65)

In the poem “ Fra Lippo Lippi” the speaker becomes a monk not by his free will but by circumstances. He was an orphan first and was compelled to live in starvation which provoked him to be a monk. The subaltern class, a part and parcel of feminism are not guided by their own free will but the free will of the master class.

Thus, to conclude we can say that Browning’s males are too much egoistic. They are jealous to their female partner in many contexts. Hence, women are murdered, killed or tortured by them. The innocent face of Ophelia, Cordelia come in our mind when we see that Browning’s women characters become the same victim of male institution of marriage and society. The Duchess of The Duchess of Malfi is also the same victim of domination of the male members of her family. But on the other hand the women do not make any attempt to break the patriarchal order of the society.They just undergo the control and the whims of the lovers. It seems to us as if Browning himself has no sympathetic attitude towards the tortured. The women of Browning are not given any social justice, dignity and social voice. They are subaltern, powerless and voiceless.Across the time , psychoanalytic theory has played an important role to bring a new interpretation of the minds of Browning’s characters-male and female both. A stable harmonious, peaceful society will be created if female are given their human rights as the male enjoys.

#### Work Cited:

Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (London: Routledge, 1999)

Bycroft, B., *Representations of the Female Voice in Victorian Poetry*. (Rhode Island: Brown University, English 151, autumn 2003)

<<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/ebb/bycroft14.html#porphyria>> 03/12/2006.

*Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning*, Cambridge Edition, edited by G. W. Cooke and H. E. Scudder (Boston & New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1895).

Mill, John Stuart. "The Subjection of Women." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 6th ed. Vol. 2. New York: W. W. Norton, 1993.

Ozkilic, Ismet. "Male Gender-Insecurity vs. Domination in Two Dramatic Monologues by Robert Browning: 'My Last Duchess' and 'Porphyria's Lover.'" Edmond, Oklahoma: University of Central Oklahoma Graduate College P., 1996.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 6th ed. Vol. 2. New York: W. W. Norton, 1993.

Woolford, J. & D. Karlin (eds.), *The Poems of Browning* (London & New York: Longman Group, 1991), pp. 361, 367