

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

GLIMPSES OF AN EMERGING NEW WOMAN: REASSESSING THE WOMAN FIGURE IN
ROBERT BROWNING'S *PORPHYRIA'S LOVER*

RANITA BAIN

Assistant Professor,

Department of English, Mugberia Gangadhar Mahavidyalaya, Vidyasagar University, India,

Email: ranitabain84@gmail.com



Article Received: 16/02/2022

Article Accepted: 07/02/2022

Published online:12/02/2022

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.10.1.112](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.10.1.112)

Abstract

This paper investigates how Robert Browning's *Porphyria* can be identified with the 'New Woman' of later Victorian period. The concept of 'New Woman' first appeared towards the end of 19th century in England. These women were able to attain certain level of autonomy. They were free-spirited, independent, educated and uninterested in marriage. Such women threatened conventional ideas about ideal Victorian womanhood, that portray a woman feeling completely satisfied spending her whole life inside the home taking care of the children and doing household work, and totally surrendering herself to her husband, and even that husband was chosen by someone else. But, the 'New Woman' was able to push the limits imposed by the patriarchal society. This paper examines how *Porphyria* emerges as a "New Woman" and the power struggle between *Porphyria* and the man she loved and where this patriarchal system of society stands in this struggle. It also evaluates *Porphyria*'s efforts to resist the societal forces to control her sexuality using feminist criticism.

Keywords: New Woman, sexuality, oppression, power, ideal womanhood.

"*Porphyria's Lover*", a very interesting as well as a shocking poem, is composed by the British,Victirian poet Robert Browning. The poem presents before us a man waiting for his beloved *Porphyria*, who is passionately in love with him. When he realizes that *Porphyria*'s passion for him reached its zenith he kills her by strangling. He starts to show his affection and care to the lifeless body of *Porphyria* and draws a conclusion that God approves of his act. Though *Porphyria*'s lover is thought of as a person who has lost his sanity due to societal factors, yet his ultimate motivation behind the act is very much clear to us. He wanted total control over the woman he loves.

In Browning's poetry men tend to demarcate spaces for women. Oppression of women is revealed through men showing women their place, which is home, where they are needed only to give birth to male heirs, do household work and remain as show pieces inside the enclosed surroundings, i.e., reducing them into mere commodity. However, in a certain way, these women characters, created by Browning, are actually capable of overpowering their oppressors, at least psychologically if not physically. Thus, to control such a strong willed personality as *Porphyria*, her lover has no other option but to use physical force like a beast. Robert Browning's *Porphyria* shares the same free spirit as Norwegian playwright

Henrik Ibsen's *Nora of A Doll's House* (1879). Irish feminist writer Sarah Grand invented a new term to describe such free spirited, independent women. She used the term 'New Woman', in 1894, to refer to women who wanted to change the society for good. Henry James, the British- American author, made the term "New Woman" even more popular.

Although the "New Woman" was becoming a more active participant in life as a member of society and the workforce, she was most often depicted exerting her autonomy in the domestic and private spheres in literature, theatre, and other artistic representations. The 19th-century suffrage movement to gain women's democratic rights was the most significant influence on the "New Woman". Education and employment opportunities for women were increasing as western countries became more urban and industrialized. Education helps us to develop and grow. It makes us capable of acquiring new skills and being able to communicate with others in a civilized manner. 'The desire for education which is widely felt by English women...' (Butler, 1868, pp. 7-8). Resistance to women's higher education was particularly strong at Oxford and Cambridge, where women were not allowed to read for degrees until 1920 and 1947 respectively. These ancient educational institutes thus became the showground for some of the most iconic battlefield in the struggle against male supremacy in society.

Towards the end of 19th century women became aware of their legal rights through the emergence of mass education and career opportunities. As a result, new property acts were passed and women started inheriting their property legally, which in turn, pulled them into a new position of freedom and choice. The Married Women's Property Act 1870 (33 & 34 Vict c 93), which was an Act of Parliament of the United Kingdom, permitted women, who are married, to be the legal owners of the money they earned and to inherit property. The Married Women's Property Act 1870 said that incomes and property which a married woman produced through her own hard work or inherited would be considered as her separate possessions and by the Married Women's Property Act 1882, this norm was extended to all belongings, regardless of its source or the time of its

acquisition. (Griffin, Ben (2003). It allowed newly married women to forever legally keep their own earnings and inherit property. The act also paved the way in the direction of women's right to vote.

Robert Browning's *Porphyria* appear to be a well-educated woman from her manners and level of confidence in voicing feelings for her lover- "Murmuring how she loved me" (21). Victorian Period in England was a time in which women had very little to say in society. At that time, they were not able to acquire the the right to vote, they were not permitted to own properties, when married and as the husband was the primary or sole income earner, women were not supposed to work. As they were not allowed to leave the house alone without being considered a prostitute, they were kept inside the home where they would have to take care of the offsprings and the household. As a result, as girls did not need to go to educational institute to learn their future skills as housewives, they were taught at home by their mothers who acted as their ideals. This is why Mary Wollstonecraft felt-"Considering the length of time that women have been dependent, is it surprising that some of them hug their chains, and fawn like the spaniel?". But while going through Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" the image of a woman that appear in front of us is that of a strong willed confident woman. When Porphyria enters the hut, she immediately takes control: "She shut the cold out and the storm,/And kneel'd and made the cheerless grate/Blaze up, and all the cottage warm" (57). Even before speaking, she brings back order and puts everything in its proper place. After she does this, she lets her hair down, another show of confidence and free will. After she lets down her hair, she sits beside the man, puts her arm around him, and places his head on her shoulder. Thus, she is executing all the actions here, while the man follows her instructions. She is making the man do, what she wants him to do. Though, it is also clear to us that Porphyria never tries to impose her will on her lover. She was only trying to show her love to him, as the lover himself said- "I knew/Porphyria worshipped me" (32-33). She does not want to control her partner; what she wants is the liberty to conduct herself however she choose to. In contrast, what her lover wants is to possess her

–“she was mine, mine, fair” (36). Thus, how Porphyria and her lover want each other actually reflect what each of the characters values. Because of this distinction in values, Porphyria receives the sympathy and respect of the reader. Therefore, although Porphyria’s lover seems to gain control over her, it is Porphyria who actually wins.

Virginia Woolf in the 20th century revealed how she had to fight the conventional concept of a woman’s place in society. She exposed that the traditional view of a woman’s role in Victorian society was epitomised by Coventry Patmore’s poem ‘The Angel in the House’, which was first published in 1854. The poem reveals the author’s ideal of femininity: a wife devoted to her husband, a mother devoted to her children. The role of woman in the poem embodies the Victorian theory of “Separate Spheres”(Kuersten, Ashlyn K. (2003). The patriarchal ideology of separate spheres was based primarily on notions of biologically decided gender roles and patriarchal religious doctrines, which demands that women should stay away from the public sphere – the field of politics, paid work, business and law. Women’s “proper sphere”, according to this ideology, is the sphere of domestic life, dedicated on childcare, housework and religion. Nel Noddings criticised the Victorian concept of ideal woman as “infantile, weak and mindless” (1989: 59). Virginia Woolf ridiculed the ideal of femininity depicted in the poem, writing that “She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it--in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all--I need not say it---she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty--her blushes, her great grace.” She emphasized that she “bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her”(“Professions for Women”).²

Robert Browning’s Porphyria is in noway the “Angel” of Coventry Patmore. She came to meet a man, who is obviously not her husband, in a far away place at night while it was raining and windy. –“The

rain set early in to-night,/The sullen wind was soon awake,”(1-2). There is no doubt that they share a physically intimate relationship and she actually took the lead in it- “She put my arm about her waist,/And made her smooth white shoulder bare,”(16-17). Betty Friedan defined the stereotype of “ideal woman” as –“sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love”. William Acton’s thought on female sexuality in the mean time, published in 1862, showed the medical man’s view of the ideal woman’s sexual needs, or rather the lack of it. Thus, as a general rule a humble woman hardly ever desires any sexual gratification for herself. She surrenders herself to her husband, but only to please him and, but for the craving of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his care. But the woman that Robert Browning portrayed in “Porphyria’s Lover” has “struggling passion”(23) and enjoys “to night’s gay feast”(27).

Hence, Porphyria emerges as a woman who doesn’t give in to societal power to control her sexuality. Power is a very general term that can be explained in many different ways. Foucault’s study of power emphasizes micro level power relations, rather than emphasizing on the centralized sources of societal power in organizations such as the economy or the state, Foucault’s scrutiny of power emphasizes micro level power-relations. Foucault claims that, since modern power functions in a capillary fashion throughout the social body, it is best understood in its concrete and local effects and in the day-to-day practices which maintain and reproduce power relations. This focus on the ordinary practices through which power relations are reproduced has congregated with the feminist project of scrutinizing the politics of personal relations and altering gendered power relations at the most personal levels of experience ‘in the institutions of marriage, motherhood and compulsory heterosexuality, in the ‘private’ relations between the sexes and in the everyday rituals and regimens that govern women’s relationships to themselves and their bodies’ (Sawicki 1998: 93). Nancy Fraser comments that Foucault’s work gives renewed momentum to what is often referred to as ‘the politics of everyday life’ in so far as it provides ‘the empirical and conceptual

basis for treating phenomena such as sexuality, the school, psychiatry, medicine and social science as political phenomena.' One of Foucault's most productive understandings into the workings of power at the micro-political level is his recognition of the body and sexuality as the direct locus of social control. According to this hypothesis, which is based on an incorporation of Freudian and Marxian viewpoints, free sexual activity represents a kind of rebellion in itself against the forces of suppression. Thus, Browning's Porphyria, who belongs to the Nineteenth Century Victorian society and who chose her sexual partner can be considered a rebel.

The man Porphyria loved reached a certain point when he could no longer accept that he did not have power, while Porphyria did. The way he handled the situation was by murdering Porphyria. According to M Daly, women who choose to leave their partner are at higher risk of uxoricide. The man is more likely to kill his woman before she has had the chance to establish a new connection with another man as he is afraid that she will then dedicate her reproductive properties to a male rival's offspring. It may be that Porphyria's lover felt that Porphyria was going to leave him in near future, which he could not allow at all. After Porphyria's lover strangles her, he instantly feels in control. He "warily oped her lids... untighten'd next the tress/About her neck... propp'd her neck up" (58). He is now the one who is maneuvering her body. The need to control and subjugate women is actually embedded in our religion and culture. There is this powerful metaphor of womanhood in the Judeo-Christian religion. That is the depiction of Eve as temptress, who seduced Adam to share the forbidden fruit. In the revisionist versions, the Serpent turned out to be an ambassador of Satan, who was sent to seduce Eve. Undeniably, the more Eve and subsequently all women were correlated with serpent and sin, "the greater [the] need [grew] to control, subdue, and dominate...[them]" (Philips, 29). Eve came to be regarded as representative of her sex, weak, and lustful: thus, penalty and prevention dictated "that all women subjugate themselves to wiser and superior male figures" (Fletcher, 76).

Conclusion

Thus, from the above investigation, Porphyria certainly emerges as a woman who has strong will power and who doesn't easily give in to societal pressure. At the beginning, apparently, she may look powerless, but ultimately she came out powerful and victorious with the readers' sympathy. She exercised a certain level of autonomy, when it comes to her sexuality. She went to meet her lover disregarding the social norms of the Victorian era. If we regard Henrik Ibsen's Nora of *A Doll's House* as an ideal example of "New Woman", Browning's Porphyria seems to lack the boldness to be vocal about her feelings openly. Nora leaves the household for the name of self-respect. Her character is widely debated and has been marked as the first mutinous effort of female individuals against male chauvinist mentalities. Whereas, Porphyria, though ignored the patriarchal social norms to meet her lover, yet she came in secrecy and lacks the courage to openly rebel against the rules set by the highly patriarchal society of the Victorian period. But we have to understand that when Porphyria was created (published in 1836) the concept of New Woman was nowhere in literature or art, yet in spirit she is at par with the "New Woman" like Nora (*A Doll's House* published in 1879). It is because of the struggle of women like Porphyria, women like Nora were able to take the rebellion to the next level. Hence, Porphyria is a predecessor of the "New Woman".

Notes

¹ The term "New Woman" was developed by Sarah Grand and her female colleagues. Grand established the phrase "New Woman" in a debate with Ouida in 1894. ("The New Woman-Victorian Literature – Oxford Bibliographies-".

Oxfordbibliographiesonline.com. Retrieved 18 December 2018.)

² "Professions for Women" is an abbreviated version of the speech Virginia Woolf delivered before a branch of the National Society for Women's Service on January 21, 1931; it was published posthumously in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*.

Works Cited

- Acton, William. *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life: Considered in Their Physiological, Social, and Moral Relations*. 3rd Edition. London: Churchill, 1862. Print.
- Betty, Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique*. W.W. Norton, February 19, 1963. Print.
- Browning, Robert. "Porphyria's Lover", *Selected Poems*. Karlin, Daniel (ed.). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. p. 307. 1989. Print.
- Butler, J. *The education and employment of women*. Liverpool: T. Brakell, 1868. Print.
- Daly, M; Wilson, M. "Evolutionary social psychology and family homicide". *Science*. 242 (4878): 519–524., 1988. Print.
- Fletcher, Anthony, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England, 1500-1800*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995. Print.
- Foucault, M. *The History of Sexuality*, trans. R. Hurley, Penguin Books, 1978. Print.
- Fraser, N. *Unruly Practices: power, discourse and gender in contemporary social theory*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989. Print.
- Griffin, Ben. "Class, Gender, and Liberalism in Parliament, 1868-1882: The Case of the Married Women's Property Acts". *The Historical Journal*, 2003. Print.
- Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House [Illustrated with photographs]*. Trans. William C. Archer. London: T Fisher Unwin, 1889. Print.
- Phillip, J.A. *Eve: History of an Idea*. New York: Harper Collins, 1984. Print.
- Kuersten, Ashlyn K. "Separate Spheres Doctrine". *Women and the law: leaders, cases and documents*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO. pp. 16–17. 2003. Print.
- Noddings, Nel. *Women and Evil*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. Print.
- Patmore, Coventry Kersey Dighton. *The Angel in the House, Part I & II*, London: Macmillan & Co., 1863. Print.
- Sawicki, J., 'Feminism, Foucault and "Subjects" of Power and Freedom' in *The Later Foucault: politics and philosophy*, J. Moss (ed.), London; Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998. Print.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. London: J. Johnson, 1792. Print.