



DIFFERENT FORMS OF MASCULINITY IN SELECTED POEMS OF ROBERT BROWNING: A CRITICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This article primarily focuses on the delineation of masculinity in the selected poems of Robert Browning. It is intended to highlight on the deployment of gender identity of masculinity on different perspectives. The article maintains qualitative methodology on theoretical and textual interpretations offering comparative and critical studies on different poems of Browning. It offers the conception that Browning's treatment of masculinity is heterogeneous not homogenous in nature. The socio-economical impact in creation of gender identity is also interpreted on various stand points that shows the importance of gender in the characterization in the poems of Robert Browning. In this regard different forms of behaviours and reactions of different male characters on different situations shows the excellence of Browning in the deployment of poetic subject matters and stand points. The article through textual interpretation attempts to show the dynamic features of gender identity resisting against stable position. It overall tries to make the issue compatible for contemporary academic needs.

Keywords: Character, Gender, Hegemony, Male, Masculinity.

Robert Browning is one of the most celebrated poets of Victorian period. However, he possessed a distinct position among other poets of the same period. Actually in spite of belonging to Victorian era, Browning was not confined within the literary and social customs of this period. This perception is to be interpreted on broader sense whereas in the literary arena of Browning confinement within the major issues of Victorian era was not

apparent. He had gone beyond the limitation of time and space. Having a cosmopolitan view point, Browning could freely choose the subject matters from different time and locations. In some instances the elements of modern literature are immensely found in his poetry whereas he offered priority upon the psychology of the characters belonging to different levels of the society. Browning's poetic craftsmanship captured duke, saint, lover,

painter, musician etc. He placed them in different locations and situations focusing on the inner core points of the characters through their actions, speeches and reactions. Being a master of characterization Browning had special care in the delineation of male characters. He offered wide variety of male characters highlighting on various sides of masculinity and related actions. In this regard in Browning's poetry heterogeneous form of masculinity is found surpassing its homogenous notion. In his dramatic monologues and lyric poems, the inner expressions of the male characters are exposed in diverse ways. Through such expressions, different socio-political and economic complexities are vividly apparent. The relationship between such complexities and gender performances is delineated by Browning with outstanding efforts.

Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) opined that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman (Beauvoir 301)." This opinion of Beauvoir is remarkable not only on the perspective of feminist movement but also on the studies on gender generally. It is to be interpreted that no person is born with a particular gender identity but is moderated in such a set rules of gender identities or performances. It is applicable to men also whereas the conception of gender is totally a constructed identity. Socio-political, cultural, economical factors are considerable points in this regard. Generally, gender is associated with a set of behavioural regulations that acted as the ground to create differences between men, women and transgender. In this regard the opinion of Mick Leach is very important that "Unlike the biological state of maleness, masculinity is a gender identity constructed socially, historically and politically. It is the cultural interpretation of maleness, learnt through participation in society and its institution (Leach 36)." However, the conception of masculinity is not only the indicator of creating differences between men and women but it creates intra level of

hierarchal set up within men also. R.W.Connell in *Masculinities* (1995) offered four types of masculinities like Hegemonic, Subordinate, Complicit, Marginalized. Through the introduction of plural form, Connell offered the heterogeneous form of masculinity surpassing its notional homogenous definition. In this categorization, hegemonic masculinity is the most privileged section of masculinity having physical, socio-political and economic power to dominate the men of other categories and women from all levels. The hegemonic masculinity basically became a part of patriarchy as the dominative force to control all parameters. In this regard the opinion of Bell Hooks is significant as she remarked in *The Will to Change : Men, Masculinity and Love* (2005) that "Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence (Hooks 18)."

One of the most hegemonic male characters in the poetry of Browning is the duke in *My last Duchess*. The duke is hegemonic in different senses – from the points of gender, aristocracy, financial stability. Such a type of character is dominative not only upon women but men also who were supposed to be inferior in comparison with the duke. The masculine aggression of the duke attempted to subdue everybody. In presenting the duke as a masculine, hegemonic character Browning took several tools of interpretation. In that monologue the duke showed his picture gallery to the envoy who had come to negotiate the marriage between the duke and the daughter of the count. The duke pointed the life like painting of his last duchess painted by the celebrated artist Fra Pandolf. The duke had objection against his duchess as the glimpse of smile of her face was not restricted only for her husband, the duke. The duchess couldn't discriminate

between a trivial gift and the prestige of belonging to the in-laws family of nine hundred years old reputation. Being totally dissatisfied with wife the duke took ultimate step to stop her smile. However, Browning didn't indicate clearly what step the duke actually did take. However, the duke mentioned the munificence of his would be father in law indicating that he would get huge dowry from this marriage. At last he showed the bronze statue to the envoy as the matter of prestige.

The duke is the combination of arrogance, hypocritical aristocracy, greed, cruelty, hollowness and narrowness. On the perspective of gender, the duke is extremely hegemonic who attempted to treat his wife solely as personal property. He denied the personal liberty of the duchess. Jealousy and possession got juxtaposed in the character of the duke. He couldn't discriminate between a human being and an abstract thing. He is the representative of traditional masculine ego who didn't think the existence of a woman beyond her identity attached with husband and in-laws family. The life of a woman beyond all such parameters is threatened by the duke. Apart from this perspective, the duke is extremely hegemonic in the sense of aristocracy. He was proud of his family with nine hundred years old name that he used as a tool to justify his superiority upon others who didn't possess the same. The duke had the taste of art but it was not genuine for art at all. Art was obviously the tool of the duke to show his financial capability of keeping the rare pieces of art in his house created by celebrated artists. This is the ground to treat other people inferior who didn't possess the financial capability to hire such famous artists. In this regard the bronze statue of Neptune made by Claus of Innsbruck is another notable point that justified the arrogance of the duke as well as his hypocritical false appreciation of art. The statue of Neptune, the sea god symbolized the hegemony of the duke. As the statue was 'Taming a sea horse' (Loucks and Stauffer 84) that in practical sense indicates the duke who

was intended to tame all other people. Along with jealousy greed was another feature of the duke's hegemony. In his next marriage he was not only intended to take huge dowry from father-in-law but also treated the bride as "my object" (Loucks and Stauffer 84) whereas he objectified a woman as his possession. This arrogance indicated that he would treat his next wife just like his last duchess and the situation of the bride would be same if she would not behave as per the patriarchal whim of the duke. The duke indicated the continuation of his tyrannical attitude in this regard.

Porphyria's Lover is a notable poem of Robert Browning that is atypical in nature. It is atypical in the sense that in most of other poems, Browning didn't created such a type of obscure and complex character like the male lover of the monologue. The poem deals with the situation whereas Porphyria spent a stormy night with her beloved whereas she fully dedicated herself to him. But her lover decided to kill her through strangling her hair around the neck in the sense that in this way he would get her eternally. This is a powerful monologue of Browning through which the hypocrisy, insanity, greed, masculine ego of the male lover is apparent. He wanted all the existence of Porphyria so that without him there would be no trace of Porphyria. He is extremely patriarchal whereas he said that "at last I knew/ Porphyria worshipped me (Loucks and Stauffer 102)." His male ego wanted to be worshipped by the female lover. Another fact is that he treated Porphyria as "Perfectly pure and good" (Loucks and Stauffer 102) that was to be kept under his possession only. Here purity may indicate the purity of soul of the purity of body or more specifically the virginity of Porphyria. His patriarchal viewpoint suspected that this purity might had gone if Porphyria would get the chance to meet another man or she shouldn't love her solely. The brutality of the man can be found when he described the experience of Porphyria during her death as "No pain felt she ; I am quite sure she felt no pain (Loucks and

Stauffer 102).” Browning delineated with several hegemonic male characters in poetry but this case is highly atypical. In *My Last Duchess* the poet only said that the duke took the ultimate step to stop the smile of his wife that was not reserved to him. But it is not clear whether the duke killed or relegated his wife. But in *Porphyria’s Lover*, the male character is directly more hegemonic than the duke as he himself killed his beloved only for keeping possession upon her. The repetition of the word ‘mine’ by the male lover justified the view. This is the dominative ego of the man that took the form of insane desire of masculinity. This is a brutal form of masculinity in Browning’s poetry.

Andrea del Sarto is a dramatic monologue of Robert Browning where he offered another form of masculinity. Andrea thought that if his wife Lucrezia would sit by him he could offer more artistic creativity. Lucrezia provoked him to concentrate on commercial gain from art that derived Andrea from getting spiritual glory of art. Even Andrea misused the money offered by his patron. Overall the character of Andrea seems to be an example of marital discord. However, on the point of gender, Andrea is the manifestation of masculinity in crisis. In this regard the character may be compared with the duke in *My Last Duchess* being totally different from Andrea. There is no sort of hegemony in Andrea towards wife and others. Perhaps he is the representation of victimized masculinity between the artistic pursuit and continuous pressure for gaining money through artistic works. Andrea, in spite of offering love, devotion towards wife didn’t get any positive response or sympathy from her. Andrea was not a fully weak minded man but sensitive minded that is an atypical form of masculinity before the social attribution of gender performances of men. It’s notable that the pressure of bread winner or more specifically earning money is generally vested upon men as the part of gender performance in socio-economical interpretation of masculinity. However, in the case of Andrea,

the situation was worse, as not only earning money, but the responsibility of paying the debt of wife’s cousin was vested upon him. Consequently Andrea had to compromise with spirituality of art for which he lamented. However, Andrea didn’t possess the courage to overcome such hurdles for his artistic perfection. He couldn’t direct his will power in proper channel. But it is certain that Andrea didn’t allow the readers to evaluate his character on the form of hegemonic masculinity, perhaps he may be called a character of victimized masculinity. However, in spite of being a victimized man Andrea offered positive sides of masculinity. He had no indignation, anger towards Lucrezia for her negligence towards him.

The Last Ride Together is another masterpiece of Robert Browning whereas the dissection of soul is brilliantly accomplished. The poem deals with the situation whereas a man after being rejected by a lady only requested her to have a last ride together. The man was happy and satisfied with this having optimism for fulfilling his desire of love in after life. The person is another non-hegemonic and sensitive male character in the poetic gallery of Browning. The man had no objection towards the lady who rejected him but he interpreted the situation on philosophical tone. His philosophic view was that it is not possible to fulfil all will, all desires in a single mundane life. In this regard the man is satisfied in his mundane life that the lady gave consent to his last proposal of having a ride together. In this regard, the personality of the male lover is to be compared with another male lover— the lover of Porphyria in *Porphyria’s Lover*. Both lovers believed in the eternity of love but the perceptions and actions are different. Porphyria’s lover strangled her for making the moment of love immortal that is partially the outcome of his dominative masculine ego, desire and jealousy. If he wouldn’t strangle her, the lady would get the chance to choose another lover or evaluate her existing lover in her own

way. But the man concluded all such possibilities through killing her. Browning here offered a contrast between two types of male lovers. One in spite of having consent from the lady love killed her, another after not getting consent is satisfied with the last moment with the lady in riding. He is optimistic of getting consent in the after life. It is notable that unlike Andrea, the male lover in *The Last Ride Together* is not a character of victimized masculinity, not an embodiment of hegemonic masculinity but he offered masculinity with optimism. He didn't challenge the failure in this life as the part of masculine ego, but happily accepted the limitation of a single mundane life. Andrea was only a victimized man who couldn't find any positive way to overcome the present obstacles. But the lover of *The Last Ride Together* detected the exact solution of present failure with extreme optimism. In this regard being contrasted with the duke, Porphyria's lover and Andrea, the male lover of this poem offered better and optimistic form of masculinity.

The delineation of different types of male characters is the indicator of mastery in the art of characterization of Robert Browning. As Browning was not confined within the Victorian period and English territory, the psychology of male characters in different parts of the world in different period is detected in his wide canvas of poetry. It is a remarkable contribution in the studies on gender that made it easy for the readers to interpret the core points from different stand points and situations. The dramatic monologue technique of Browning is very important in this regard. Dramatic monologue technique not only enables the male speakers to express the thoughts but to show the attitude to the listeners. It makes the readers capable to capture the masculine attitude of the characters towards the society. In this regard social interpretation of masculinity is also possible. Another point here is to be mentioned that added the significance of Browning in the delineation of male characters. Like Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare Browning

had no partiality towards his characters. He was extremely frank in describing the degraded as well as the idealistic portions of his characters. It makes his characterization more reliable and authentic from the stand point of gender. As the poetry of Browning is a study of soul, the interior portions of the characters are vividly shown on different situations. The combination of simplicity, complexity, argument, justification offered the touch of reality to the characters. Through arguments and justification the ground of masculine performances is apparent such as The duke of Ferrara and Porphyria's lover. It shows how much the characters are autonomous and how much they are associated with the socio-economic conditions of the period.

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