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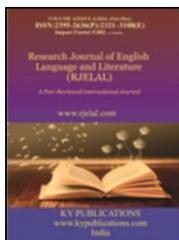
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## BEAUTY, RELIGION AND FEMINISM IN ROBERT BROWNING'S POETRY

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### ABSTRACT

Using the feminist literary theory, this paper analyses seven poems of Robert Browning on a woman's beauty. Our contention or argument in this paper is that Browning's liberalism as well as his feminism is displayed when he shows in his poetry that contrary to the Puritan concept that physical beauty is a temptation leading one away from spiritual beauty, to him physical beauty is a prerequisite to attaining spiritual beauty. This ties in with the Protestant view that to reach God, one does not have to pass through any established religion. This paper reveals that in Browning's poetry there is an intricate link between beauty, religion and feminism and that to Browning the role played by a woman is just like the role played by the Virgin Mary to most Catholic Christians, reason why they venerate her.

Key words: beauty, religion, feminism, liberalism and women

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One of the recurrent themes in the poetry of all times is the celebration of the woman's beauty. The question one must ask is, must a woman's beauty jeopardise her chances of emancipating herself from patriarchy? Is Browning's celebration of a woman's beauty an end in itself or it is a means towards the attainment of higher goals or both? What is the link between beauty and feminism and religion and feminism or simply beauty, religion and feminism in Robert Browning's poetry? In this paper we are going to discuss poems which celebrate a woman's beauty as an end in itself as seen in the poems "Poetics", "Summum Bonum", and "Women and Roses" as well as poems which celebrate a woman's beauty not as an end in itself but as a means of achieving higher spiritual truths in the poems "Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli", "Helen's Tower", "A Pearl, a Girl" and "Magical Nature". This paper handles two important issues in feminism: beauty and feminism and religion and feminism. In this paper our hypothetical contention is that Browning's liberalism

as well as his feminism is displayed when he shows in his poetry that contrary to the Puritan concept that physical beauty is a temptation leading one away from spiritual beauty, to him physical beauty is a prerequisite to attaining spiritual beauty which ties in with the Protestant view that to reach God one does not have to pass through any established religion.

Beauty in feminism is a very thorny issue like fidelity. It can be used against feminism just like it can be used to promote it. Beauty can be used against feminism when it becomes what Naomi Wolf calls the beauty myth. In her book titled *The Beauty Myth* she writes:

The beauty myth is an employer saying to a woman engineer, we can't hire you because you're so pretty you'll keep men from doing their work. It's a male student telling a female class-mate that she got a scholarship only because of her looks. It's the phrase "you're too pretty to be a

feminist". It is an Alabama judge ruling that he didn't believe Karen Smith had been sexually harassed by her boss because in his opinion the boss's wife was rather prettier... It's congressmen, beaten again this year by a professional women's basketball team saying "they're prettier. Instead of simply : "They won" (5).

Beauty can be used to foster the cause of feminism like in beauty contest. In Cameroon during the Miss Cameroon contest the winner is not only beautiful but also intelligent, morally sound and bilingual in English and French. In *Feminisms :An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* Robyn R. Warhol in her article entitled "Feminism" writes : "Most feminists agree that it is important to celebrate women and their works" (308). This is also the opinion of Bauer and Lutes in an article in the same book titled "Beauty".

Feminists have shown that all religions are patriarchal, misogynistic and even sexist: Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Orthodox Greek Church and Islam. Of all these major religions of the world, only Islam has been shown to be feminist<sup>1</sup>. Feminism came as a result of the political, economic, psychological, cultural, physical, linguistic ,philosophical, scientific, professional and legal oppression and discrimination women have experienced.

It may be asked what those characteristics are or qualities which make us label a work feminist? Any work which is written about women, for women, by women and which serves as a forum for women is feminist. A literary work which helps to achieve cultural androgyny, promotes sisterhood, augments female consciousness, has a female audience in mind, discusses sympathetically the situation of women and celebrates women and their works is feminist. Feminist works usually denounce violence against women, the use of women as objects, property, toys or tools, any prejudice, discrimination against women, anti-misogynistic, woman hating attitudes, phallogocentric, masculinist, patriarchal or sexist thinking. It equally represents women as religious, virtuous or pious and not as agents of the devil or evil, that is, "supreme temptress" or "Janua diabolic" as in the Middle

Ages. A feminist literary work valorises or creates a matrilineage, preaches equality between men and women, liberty for women, advocates that women should also inherit property, shows a woman expressing her love by wooing a man if she loves that man as well as female self-assertiveness. Briefly, any work of art which represents women positively is feminist.

During the Victorian period, there was a Victorian philosophy of religion in literature. This is seen in literary works like *Aurora Leigh* and *Great Expectations*. *Aurora Leigh* shares with *Great Expectations* the notion that women have power to remoralize man and to bring him closer to God. This shows the function of the woman as a moral repository in Victorian literature. That is certainly why the following statement is made:

In his poetry the love of woman is not only strikingly analogous to the love of God – the attitude of worship, the acceptance of rejection (in her will is our peace), the lasting devotion – it is also explicitly identified with religion by making it the symbolic representation of divine love and merging the two in a typically Romantic distortion of Platonism (Houghton 390).

The above statement can be summarized thus: in Browning's poetry the love of woman is not only strikingly analogous to the love of God ; it is also explicitly identified with religion. In Browning's poetry, we see him worshipping a woman who has become a kind of religion to him. In Browning's poetry as we shall soon see, he represents women as angels or mediators between him and his god. This shows Browning's liberalism.

The role played by a woman to Browning is almost like the role played by the Virgin Mary to most Catholic Christians. She is usually seen as a mediator between man and God. That is why Catholic Christians pray to her and that is why she is usually referred to as the "Mother-of-God"<sup>2</sup>. It is through her that God can take a human form. Her role in the *Bible* is usually seen as compensation to most women who feel uncomfortable with the role of Eve who is shown as principally responsible for the Fall. She is portrayed as an agent of the devil. "Should not all women be honoured for the sake of the Virgin Mary?" (Power 26).

Browning was brought up as a Protestant. This is the religion he received from his parents. When we read Browning's poetry, we see that his religion is mysticism or spiritualism. This was even seen in his first poem "Pauline" published in 1833. That is why Ian Jack in *Browning's Major Poetry* writes :

It is clear that Browning's own feeling of guilt at his apostasy from the stern and simple religion of his mother was one of his principal excitements to write "Pauline", and by a curious chance we have direct evidence of his passion for aggressive metaphysical argument, a few years earlier (14).

Browning became an apostate in early life. Apostasy means giving up one's beliefs or faith or turning from one's religion. Browning's presentation of women in his poetry may be linked to his spiritualism or mysticism. Like Wordsworth he may be a pantheist not a Protestant as most people believe. We know of course that most metaphysicians, transcendentalists, spiritualists, occultists still attain the traditional churches.

#### BEAUTY AND FEMINISM IN ROBERT BROWNING'S POETRY

In the poems "Poetics", "Women and Roses", and "Magical Nature", Browning sets out to celebrate a woman's beauty. In these two poems he appreciates a woman's beauty just as he sees it. It maybe mystical but he does not want to reach a Supreme Being through this woman and her beauty. This woman may have supernatural powers or divine qualities.

The poem "Poetics" shows the speaker's determination to discard his detractors and love the woman they scold because she is what the speaker calls "her human self". His detractors use metaphors like flower, rose, balm, moon and swan. All these metaphors denote her beauty. This poem is a short lyric of ten lines.

'So, say the foolish ! Say the foolish so, love ?

'Flower she is, my rose – or else "My very swans she' –

'Or perhaps 'Yon maid moon, blessing earth below, love

That art thou ! – to them, belike :

No such vain words from me.

Hush, rose, blush ! no balm like breath, I chid it !

'Bend thy neck its best, swan, - hers the whiter curved

'Be the moon the moon ! My love I place beside it !

What is she ! Her human self – no lower word will serve. (1 – 10)

This woman's neck is whiter. This comparative adjective shows her superb beauty. "Yon maid moon, blessing earth below" is a verse which reveals the spirituality or religiosity of the woman. She is a kind of goddess to the speaker. She is blessing the earth below. Blessing is a religious act done by the priest, priestess, god(s) or goddess(es).

"Women and Roses" is a poem which sets out to celebrate a woman's beauty. It is an eight stanza poem in which the poet talks about three generations of woman. In the first stanza, we are told that this poem is a dream – "I dream of a red-rose tree / And which of its roses three / Is the dearest rose to me" begins this poem. Here we realise that the speaker of this poem is presented with a tree of rose bearing three red roses and one of these three roses is the most expensive to the speaker of this poem. We know that a rose flower comes from a rose tree which is a shrub with prickles or thorns on its stems and bearing a beautiful and usually sweet-smelling colours : It can be red, pink, white, cream or yellow. Of all these colours of the rose, the best and the most attractive to most people is the red colour. That is what the poet calls "a red-rose tree". It seems that the poet also prefers this red rose. White and yellow are also good colours of the rose flower that a man can admire.

The poet begins this poem by saying that he dreams of a red rose tree, not a red rose flower. When he says a red rose tree, it means that there is a risk here. If he says a red rose flower, there is no risk. A red rose flower does not imply the presence of a rose tree but a rose tree implies the presence of a rose flower. A rose tree implies that to get the rose flower, you must try to avoid prickles or thorns on the stems of the rose tree. This is the situation in this poem. The rose tree in this poem is symbolically a spiritual or mystical world where to go and get a

beautiful woman is extremely difficult. We may ask ourselves, what does the rose flower symbolise? The rose flower symbolises love, beauty and mysticism as we see in the poetry of W. B. Yeats seen in his second poetry publication titled *The Rose* in 1893 with such poems as "To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time", "The Rose of the World", "The Rose of Peace" and "The Rose of Battle".

In stanza two, the poet talks about the three generations of women representing the three roses we have talked about in the first stanza. These three generations of women are: women of the past, women "living and loving" and women who are unborn. In a mystical depiction, the poet says that "In a dazzling drift, as its guardians, go", "Round and round; like a dance of snow", he first sees "Floating the women faded for ages / Sculptured in stone, on the poet's pages". These are women of the past. Then follow "The women fresh and gay, / Living and loving and loved to-day". These are women of the present, our age. Lastly he sees "Last, in the rear, flee the multitude of maidens / Beauties unborn". What is happening is that all these three generations of women "to one cadence" "Circle their rose" on his rose tree. This is very mystical.

In stanza three the poet addresses his own rose: "Dear rose, thy turn is reached / Thy leaf hangs loose and bleached: / Bees pass it unimpeached". This means that after the first phase which is difficult, the rest of the mystical experience is easy, that is, to get access to his wife or lover is easy now. That is why he says that the "leaf hangs loose". Loose here is an adjective which means free, and it is "bleached", that is, it has been made white by chemical action or sunlight. Since his leaf is loose, bees can pass it without any obstacles or without being stopped or prevented, he can now get to his lady without being stopped. The speaker is compared to a bee and his lady to a rose flower. This means the bee is coming for nectar and that the rose flower has nectar. This can be likened to the relationship between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

In stanza Four, he advises the rose to stoop since he cannot climb. We are told that his rose belongs to the past generation. He wishes to possess her and to be possessed by her. This shows equality

between man and woman – the lover and his mistress or lady. The speaker asks his mistress one important question: "You, great shapes of the antique time: / How shall I fix you, fire you, freeze you, / Break my heart at your feet to please you?" His lady is "great shapes", he wants to fix, fire and freeze her. The alliteration "f" in fix, fire and freeze with the "great shapes" reflects the mystical mood in the poem and shows that the lady is extraordinary.

In stanza five the poet says that the joy of his rose is "undimmed", her "cup is ruby-rimmed" and "thy cup's heart nectar-brimmed". Undimmed means that her joy is bright or clearly seen. Her "cup is ruby-rimmed". "Rimmed" here means rounded or surrounded. A ruby is a red jewel or when referring to colour, it refers to deep red colour. The colour of her cup is the preferable red colour of the rose, jewel-like, which means that it is very precious and beautiful. "The cup's heart nectar-brimmed". "Brimmed" means full to the edge of a cup. The nectar is full to the edge of the cup. Nectar is a sweet liquid in flowers which is collected by bees looking for nectar. Nectar also refers to any delicious drink. In ancient Greek stories it referred to the drink of the gods. In ancient Greek the food of the gods was called ambrosia. Ambrosia refers to anything that has a delightful taste or smell.

In stanza six the poet compares himself to a bee sucking nectar. In stanza Seven, we are told that his rose has no thorn. In the last stanza he talks about his creation of a super-woman: "I will make an Eve, be the artist that began her / Shaped her to his mind!" in his poetry who is Eve – like not in terms of evil but in terms of being very prominent or active in society like Eve was in the Garden of Eden.

Stanzas II, IV, VI and VIII end in a repeated line: "They circle their rose on my rose tree". These four stanzas have nine lines each. Stanzas I, III, V and VII have only three lines with the rhyme scheme of a triplet: a a a. Stanzas II, IV, VI and VIII have regular rhyme: aa bb cc dd e – four couplets followed by one line which rhymes differently. The regular rhyme scheme of this poem portrays the beautiful nature of women and the roses. The speaker's woman / rose is not taken from the living and the unborn but from the past. We know why. Elizabeth

Barrett Browning no longer lived. She was already a woman of the past. There is no doubt that the poet should prefer but a woman or the rose of the past : “the women faded for ages, / Sculptured in stone, on the poet’s pages”. It will not be an overstatement to say that this poem describe the wooing or courtship between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

The poem “Magical Nature” is a poem which explores the theme of appearance and reality. A woman appears as a flower but inside she is a jewel. This again denotes her religiosity. This also means that there is more to the woman than the physical appearance. Flower suggests or refers to her beauty and jewel her religiosity.

Flower – I never fancied, jewel – I profess you !  
Bright I see and soft I feel the outside of a flower  
Save but glow inside and – jewel, I should guess you,  
Dim to sight and rough to touch; the glory is the dower  
You, forsooth, a flower? Nay, my love, a jewel –  
Jewel at no mercy of a moment in your prime!  
Time may fray the flower-face: kind be time or cruel  
Jewel, from each facet, flash your laugh at time (1-8)

#### RELIGION AND FEMINISM IN ROBERT BROWNING’S POETRY

In the poems “A Pearl, a Girl”, “Summum Bonum”, “Helen’s Tower”, and “Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli”, Browning celebrates a woman’s beauty with the aim of using it to reach his God. The poem “A Pearl, a Girl” is a poem in which Robert Browning talks about the appearance of a woman and the reality of that woman. It is a two-stanza poem.

In the first stanza of this poem, the poet says that a “vulgar eye” will not know that a “simple ring with a single stone” is a “stone of price”. If you whisper a right word to it, a sprite will start off like fire from ice and then you are a lord. This is contained in “An Eastern Scroll”. You will become the lord of heaven and earth through the power of a pearl.

A SIMPLE ring with a single stone

To the vulgar eye no stone of price !  
Whisper the right word, that alone -  
Forth starts a sprite, like fire from ice  
And lo, you are lord (says an Eastern Scroll)  
Of heaven and earth, lord whole and sole  
Through the power in a pearl. (1 – 7)

This is a mystical experience. This mystical experience which is described in this poem is evidenced by the use of words like sprite, “fire from ice” and “an Eastern Scroll”. A sprite is a fairy or an elf. We see the role of the fairies in the poetry of a modern mystic like W. B. Yeats. Fire coming out of ice is impossible. It can only happen in a mystical medium. Eastern Scroll will take us to the mysticism of Asian countries like China, India and Japan. A scroll is a roll of paper or parchment for writing on. An Eastern Scroll will refer to a book in arcane occultic or mystical study. The assonance and internal rhyme “whole and sole” also reinforces this mysticism we find in this poem.

The second stanza is made up of what the poet is saying. You in the first stanza refers to anybody who embarks on a mystical journey or experience. Instead of talking about the pearl as in the first stanza, he replaces the pearl with a woman (in the second stanza) whom the world does not count worthy of praise. If you utter the right word to a woman, her soul will escape from her. The poet says he is wrapped in blaze, creation’s Lord and he becomes “Lord whole and sole – by a minute’s birth / Through the love in a girl”.

A woman (‘t is I this time that say  
With little the world counts worthy of praise  
Utter the true word – out and away  
Escapes her soul : I am wrapped in blaze  
Creation’s Lord, of heaven and earth  
Lord whole and sole – by a minute’s birth  
Through the love in a girl ! (8 – 14).

When the poet says that he is “wrapped in blaze/Creation’s lord”, it means he has reached his God through a woman, that is, a girl. The Lord of heaven and earth is God.

The poem “Summum Bonum” is a poem in which Robert Browning eulogises the woman more than in any poem of his which celebrates a woman’s beauty. In this poem, he compares the woman to a

bee, a gem and a pearl. The bee is a feminine creature. The masculine creature is the drone which is a very lazy and a useless creature. The word bee is a metaphor which denotes hard work. We always say "as busy as a bee". Thus, this woman in this poem is not only beautiful, she is also very hard-working. "Pearl" and "gem" are very precious stones. The metaphors "gem" and "pearl" like other metaphors such as "breath and bloom of the year", bag, wonder, wealth, shade and "shine of the sea" all denote and celebrate her beauty. Above all, he tells us that through his contact with this woman, he experiences a purer and brighter truth which is above her. "Summum Bonum" is also a short lyric.

All the breath and the bloom of the year in  
the bag of one bee :

All the wonder and wealth of the mine in  
the heart of one gem :

In the core of one pearl all the shade and  
the shine of the sea :

Breath and bloom, shade and shine, -  
wonder, wealth, and - how far above them  
-

Truth, that's brighter than gem,

Trust, that's purer than pearl -

Brightest truth, purest trust in the universe,  
- all were for me

In the kiss of one girl. (1 - 11)

The poem "Helen's Tower" was written on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1870 at the request of the Marquis of Dufferin. It is a short lyric of fourteen lines :

Who hears of Helen's Tower, may dream  
perchance

How the Greek beauty from Scaean gate  
Gazed on old friends unanimous in hate  
Death - doomed because of her fair  
countenance.

Hearts would leap otherwise at thy advance  
Lady, to whom this tower is consecrate !  
Like hers, thy face once made all eyes elate,  
Yet, unlike others, was bless'd by every  
glance.

The tower of hate is outworn, far and  
strange.

A transitory shame of long ago.

It dies into the sand from which it sprang ;  
But thine

Love's rock-built Tower, shall fear no  
change

God's self laid stable earth's foundations  
so,

When all the morning stars together sang.  
(1 - 14)

This poem compares and contrasts Helen's Tower and that of the Marquis of Dufferin. Helen's Tower was that of hatred and that of the Marquis is of love. This poem celebrates the beauty of the two women. Helen's Tower has been destroyed but that of the Marquis will remain forever. Helen's Tower was that of the past, that of the Marquis is of the future. Helen's Tower was that of destruction, that of the Marquis is of "construction".

The poet begins by saying that those who hear of "Helen's Tower" will only think of how Helen "The Greek beauty" from the "Scaean gate / Gazed on old friends" who were "Death - doom'd because" of her beauty - "of her fair countenance". He says hearts will leap when they see the Marquis's face to whom the tower he is talking about is consecrated. He compares and contrasts the two ladies - their faces. Like Helen's face, the Marquis' face "made all eyes elate" but unlike Helen's face her own face "was bless'd by every glance". He now says that Helen's tower which was a tower of "hate" is out - worn, far and strange, a transitory shame of long ago which has died into the sand from which it sprang. We know here he is referring to the image of Helen drawn from Greek mythology. This Helen can also represent Eve in the *Old Testament* This is in Homer's *Iliad*. The significance of Helen in Greek mythology and Homer's work is that she is a symbol of destruction (evil). The Marquis's Tower which is "love's rock - built tower, shall fear no change". He ends the poem by saying that "God's self laid stable earth's foundations, so, / When all the morning stars together sang".

This is a poem in which a woman is eulogized and given religious overtones. We see the image of the Virgin Mary in the Marquis to whom the tower is consecrated in her name - a kind of a chapel or church. By implication the speaker or poet is a worshipper of this lady in her shrine or tower and she is a kind of mediator between him and God. Through the Virgin Mary we can pass through easily to Christ and to God. That is the Catholic conception and the veneration of the Virgin

Mary. She is seen as an “intercessor” between us and Christ or God. This concept is captured in the three last verses of the poem. “Love’s rock – built Tower”, “God’s self laid stable earth’s foundations so, / When all the morning stars together sang”. Biblically we know that Christ is referred to as Love. He was succeeded on earth by Peter the rock who is the Pope today. The line “Love’s rock – built Tower” can thus be interpreted as “Christ’s church built with a tower of Mary”. The verse “God’s self laid stable earth’s foundations so,”, refers to Jesus. Christ, “God’s self”, “laid stable earth’s” is brought to this world by the Blessed Virgin Mary. As the child Christ is brought to this world, the angels are singing in the early morning. This is seen in the last stanza: “When all the morning stars together sang”. It is only through the Blessed Virgin Mary that God can take a human form and bring salvation to humankind on earth who had fallen from the Garden of Eden because of the action initiated by Eve.

The concept of a woman as an angel started during the Victorian period as a result of the “disappearance of God” brought about by the scientific postulations of scientists like Darwin. Many people lost their faith as a result of the revelations of Mr. Darwin. At this time also the Industrial Revolution brought in the concept of Mammonism or materialism and as a result the public sphere of commerce, business and politics was one symbolised or presented as evil. The only place which was safe for man was the domestic sphere, his home which had an angel in it. This concept is well explained in Coventry Patmore’s poem “The Angel in the House”. Women were therefore given angelic qualities in literature and in life. If they were not “angelic”, they were royal because of the image of the Queen Victoria. Most of them were represented as angelic. Browning also like a good Victorian presented women as angelic. Browning’s biographers even tell us that he considered his wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning as an angel.

In the poem “Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli” Browning presents to us the image of the woman as an angel in addition to the fact that she is also a kind of mediator between him and his god. Godfrey Rudel was a troubadour of the twelfth century. He fell in love with a countess of Tripoli whom he knew

only by report. There is a legend that he went to Tripoli and died in this lady’s arms.

Stop ford A. Brooke says that “It is not Rudel who speaks but Browning. It is not the twelfth but the nineteenth century which has made all that analysis and overworked illustration” (274). This poem also has something related to Browning’s relationship with Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Browning fell in love with Elizabeth Barrett Browning before he even met her though the stories of Kenyon, Elisabeth’s “god-father” who used to talk to him about her. It is not wrong to say that the speaker of this poem is Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning his wife the Mount, Angel or Sunflower. There is no doubt that this story of Rudel should interest Robert Browning. It parallels his own life.

In the poem “Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli”, men call the Lady of Tripoli the sun flower which is under the Mount the sun cannot see but is imitating (this sunflower).

I know a Mount, the gracious sun perceives

First, when he visits, last, too, when he leaves  
The world; and vainly favoured, it repays  
The day – long glory of his steady gaze  
But no change of its large calm font of snow.  
And underneath the Mount, a Flower I know  
He cannot have perceived, that changes ever  
At this approach, and in the lost endeavour  
To live his life, has parted, one by one,  
With all a flower’s true grace, for the grace  
Of being but a foolish mimic sun  
With ray – like florets round a disk – like face.  
(1-12 )

In the lines above Browning says that he knows the mountain the sun’s rays first touch when the sun rises and also the last place on earth where the sun shines before setting. The mountain has snow on it which the sun does not change. Under this mountain lies a flower which the sun cannot or has not seen but which changes at the approach of the sun. This is what a natural or real sunflower does. Browning now says that the sun is imitating this flower. How does the sun imitate the flower in this poem? The sun imitates the flower by imitating the flower’s grace. The speaker tells us that the flower which the sun has not seen changes at its approach, the sun on its part takes or borrows its grace from this flower.

This shows the interdependence between heavenly and earthly bodies. The sun gives the sunflower light and in turn borrows the grace from the sunflower. This reminds us of Donne's poem "The Sun Rising".

One may ask the question why Robert Browning compares his lady to a sunflower: what is a sunflower and what symbolic purpose does it serve? In botany as revealed in the journal *AWAKE, a Christian Magazine by the Jehovah's Witnesses* the sunflower is a word in English which comes from the Latin name *Helianthus annus*, derived from the Greek words meaning sun and flower. The sunflower is really a flower which turns to face the sun. Both its leaves and its flowers are heliotropic, that is, oriented by sunlight. Once the flowers are in full bloom, however, they are no longer heliotropic but generally remain facing the east<sup>3</sup>. This is maybe why Robert Browning talks about the east in this poem.

One cannot hesitate to say that Browning was inspired by the sunflower itself in this poem. The sunflower has proved to be a valuable gift to mankind. Its beauty has inspired artistic works such as Vincent Van Gogh's painting. The sunflower has a cherry face. From what has been presented above, we realise that the sunflower is very important to humankind because of its usefulness<sup>2</sup> and beauty. A woman like a sunflower is not only beautiful but she is also very useful to humankind. Through the sunflower (Elizabeth Barrett Browning) which has something to do with the sun (God), Robert Browning can get to his God (the sun). The sunflower therefore is the mediator between Robert Browning and God.

In the second stanza he addresses this woman as an angel: "Oh angel of the East, one gold look / Across the waters to this twilight nook / The far sad waters, Angel to the nook!". In the third and last stanza, he addresses This woman as a pilgrim:

Dear pilgrim, art thou for East indeed?  
Go! – saying ever as thou does proceed.  
That I French Rudel, choose for my device  
A Sunflower outspread, like a sacrifice  
Before its idol. See! (22-26)

The speaker is a sacrifice and the woman is an idol which is a kind of goddess. The way the poem ends shows or suggests that this woman is a mediator between him and his God or Sun:

But, as the flower's concern is not for these  
But solely for the Sun, so men applaud  
"In vain this Rudel, he not looking here  
But to the East – the East! Go, say this  
pilgrim dear! (33-36)

The metaphors angel and pilgrim show the pious nature of this woman whereas the metaphors flower and sunflower show her beauty. East is used here as a symbol for heaven or the Garden of Eden or Paradise. We are told in the *Bible* that the Garden of Eden was in the East<sup>4</sup>.

In this paper we have seen the link between beauty, religion and feminism in Browning's poetry. We have come to the realization that Browning's male characters use a woman's beauty to venerate her or to use it as a stepping stone to reach their personal gods. This is positive, liberal and at the same times a stand against established religion. Liberalism rejected many foundational assumptions which dominated most earlier theories of government such as the divine rights of kings, hereditary status and established religion. In this chapter we have seen that Browning in his poetry keeping to his religion of non-conformism which is part of his liberalism, is against any established religion. This shows his liberalism. Because of his religion of non-conformism, he celebrates a woman's beauty profusely. This makes him a feminist in his poetry.

#### NOTES

1. Muhammad Dori in *Women, Feminism and Islam* concludes that "This shows that before Islam, no religion or nation accorded any equality to women either in inheriting their husbands or parents"[5]. The periodical The Institute of Islamic Information and Education writes: "Actually, the women's liberation movement was not begun by women but was revealed by God to a man in the seventh century by the name of Muhammad [peace be upon him] who is known as the prophet of Islam". Many passages have been quoted from the *Quar'an* which are feminist by Aisha Lemu in *A Degree Above Them: Observations on the Condition of the Northern Nigeria Women*. The *Quar'an* unlike the Bible is feminist. Unlike the Bible which uses many

false masculine generics like he and she for he and she, man man for man and woman, most of the sentences in the *Quar'an* are balanced: boys and girls, sons and daughters, husbands and wives. In the *Status of Women in Islam* the author says "Islam removed some of the false notions about women. It, for instance, refuted the idea that Eve tempted Adam to disobey God and thus caused his downfall. All of them disobeyed and the woman is not thus a source of evil". To Islam, the word woman is derived from "Ar-Raham" i.e. the Gracious One, a name of Allah. All the prophets in the *Quar'an* respected their wives. The *Quar'an* says women should also inherit [Quar'an 4.7]

2. J.M.J Book Company. *Divine Mysteries of the Most Holy Rosary Necedah*, Wis.54646. J.M.J Book Company 1979 (Taken verbatim from the *City of God* (4 volumes). In this book she is described as mother –of- God, the mother of the King of Heaven, the Heavenly Mistress, the Heavenly Maiden, the Mistress of Heaven and Earth,... she is "Mother and Intercessor", (page 108). The book says that she should remain as Queen of the Universe, as the Representative and instrument of the Divine Power on Earth. She is the Woman of the *New Testament*, a symbol of salvation and not evil.
3. The sunflower is economically useful to humankind. There are dozens of species of *Helianthus*, and new hybrid varieties are constantly being developed. Normally only two species are cultivated for agricultural purposes: *Helianthus Annus* is mainly grown for the production of sunflower oil and *Helianthus Tuberosis* or Jerusalem artichoke is cultivated for its potato-like tubers. These are used for livestock feed and in the production of sugar and alcohol. Most sunflowers today are grown for their seeds which produce an excellent oil. Sunflower oil is used for cooking, in salad dressings, and in margarine. The seeds have a high nutritional value, containing 18 to 22 percent protein and other nutrients. Many people enjoy lightly roasted, salted sunflower seeds as a snack. Flour made from the seeds is used as an additive in baking. Moreover, lip balm, hand cream, body lotion, and baby-care products. It is even used in the

manufacture of industrial motor oil. Sunflower seeds are also used as food for birds and small animals. A sunflower field is a paradise for honey-bees: one hectare of sunflowers may yield from 25 to 50 kilograms of honey. When the sunflower harvest is over, the stalks that remain are between 43 and 48 percent cellulose, which is useful in making paper and other products. Leftover parts of the sunflower can serve as silage for livestock or as fertilizer. The sunflower usually grows to about two metres in height, but some giant specimens grow to more than twice that height. The sturdy stalk and rough green leaves are crowned with a big, round flower with bright-yellow petals.

4. *The Book of Genesis* Chapter 2, verses 8-9. "Then the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the East, and there he put the man he had formed...". It should be noted that all the major religions originated from the East and a good number of the prophets descended from the Jews. It is only Mohammed who came from Saudi Arabia. Both the Muslims and the Christians have a common ancestry – Abraham. The Muslims pray facing the East for two reasons – to remember the shrine of Abraham (Kaba'h) who is the father of both the Jews and the Muslims, and to have a sense of direction and unity amongst the Muslims. The Kaba'h was built in the East.

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