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Echo of Socio-political Tones in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *A Curse for a Nation*

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Abstract:

The paper attempts to highlight the humanistic concern of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to write a poem that can be read both as an emotional plea and a vehement curse of social injustice for both children and women. She has tried to draw attention to different forms of social injustices such as the slave trade in America, the child labor in the mines, the exploitation of children at the hands of capitalists, the confinement of women during the Victorian era. Her political poems reveal her feminine concern for many social, moral and political issues of the Victorian era. Though the industrial Revolution was dually seen as both detrimental and beneficial; but the writers such as Browning poised their pens in an effort to thwart social injustice through poetry. The problems of child labor in the early to mid 1880's as well as the issue of sex stereotyping were Browning's choice for literary pursuit.

Keywords: **Feminine, capitalist, slave trade, humanism**

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was one of the most eminent and distinguished poets of the Victorian era, with a career spanning four decades. Among all women poets of the English-speaking world in the nineteenth century, no other poet got such critical acclaim or was held in higher critical esteem for the independence and courage of her views than Elizabeth Barrett Browning. During the years of her marriage to Robert Browning, her literary repute far surpassed that of her poet-husband; when visitors came to their home in Florence, she was perpetually the greater attraction. Both in England and in the United States she had a wide following among cultured readers. An example of her popularity and fame may be seen in the influence she had upon the recluse poet who lived in the rural college town of Amherst, Massachusetts. A framed portrait of Mrs. Browning hung in the bedroom of Emily Dickinson, whose life had been transfigured by the poetry of "that Foreign Lady." From the time when she had first become acquainted with Mrs. Browning's writings, Dickinson had happily admired her as a poet and had practically idolized her as a woman who had achieved such a rich accomplishment in her life.

During that time, the conservative women poets wrote about nature, religion or the domestic space but she established herself as a woman who was never afraid to articulate her views on contemporary social and political issues. She wrote about industrialization, slavery,

political leadership, religious controversy, the problems faced by women in society, and she is often considered as unconventional and combative. She always questioned and judged conservative views and was never afraid that she might affront readers by what she had to say.

She inherited her views about what poetry could do chiefly from the poets of the Romantic period – in particular William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, George Gordon, Lord Byron. It was under the influence of these literary figures that she established her strong conviction that poetry had the power to persuade social and political thinking. As Shelley famously put it in 'A Defence of Poetry', poets were 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world.' Beyond poetry, the teenage Barrett Browning was a great admirer of proto-feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, whose monumental work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) influenced her views on the position of women in society. Moreover, her father and brother were politically active in the Whig party – the party which stood in opposition to the Tories and which fought for the legal, civil and religious rights of the individual. She tackled the social and political injustices and argued for tolerance and liberty as a professional poet.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, regarded as "the true daughter of her age" by Virginia Woolf (Carter 268) is a Victorian *sui generis* who has recurrently dealt with contemporary societal and ethical affairs. Her commitment to write about social and political concerns developed early in Barrett Browning's career. Her first published poems, which appeared in journals in 1821-24, were written about the ongoing Greek War of Independence (1821-32) and particularly celebrated Byron's part in the campaign. Her long poem published in 1826, *An Essay on Mind*, also emphasized in part the idea of the poet being able to bring about political change, while her volumes of the 1830s – *Prometheus Bound, and Miscellaneous Poems* (1833) and *The Seraphim, and Other Poems* (1838) – saw her starting to look at other socio-political issues, including the nature of tyranny and freedom, contemporary theological debates, and problems to do with power in sexual relationships, marriage, and the family. It was with her next volume, however, *Poems* published in 1844, that Barrett Browning really proved her position as a formidable commentator on socio-political issues.

She has been acknowledged by the women poets of the 19th century for the emancipation and audacity of her views. Her fervent concern for human rights and her liberal point of view is prominent in her poems that focus at the problems faced by workers in factories and mines – the long hours, the grueling nature of the work, the lack of necessary safety, the poor food, and the expanding slum areas in which the workers lived. Barrett Browning had read about these conditions in a parliamentary report entitled, "Report of the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children and Very Young People in Mines and Factories," written in part by her friend Richard Hengist Horne. She was so shocked at what she read that she consequently sought to tackle the issues in her own writing.

"A Curse for a Nation" is the opening poem in the 1856 issue of the Boston anti-slavery annual "The Liberty Bell", written in acknowledgement to an appeal from her Boston anti-

slavery contacts .The poem was republished in “Poems Before Congress” in the spring of 1860, consisting of seven of eight poems dealing with Italian politics and the other. “A Curse for a Nation” is an anti-slavery, anti child-labor and feminist poem, highlighting the socio-political deprivation of England and America.

The poem starts off by the narrator being visited by an angel. The angel tells her to write a curse to America. The narrator tries to take a stand against the angel, telling him that Americans are their comrades and wishes to write something else to them, due to the intense gratitude he has towards America. The angel does not budge, and tells her that heaven wishes it to be done. She stops the angel and tells him that he cannot write a curse to America about slavery because her own country has problems. People are starving in the streets and do not even have shoe for walking. The speaker of “A Curse for a Nation” expresses a deep concern about her moral authority to curse. The poet was aware of her nation’s culpability on various moral issues, she positions herself as a mediating agent who curse in compliance to the angel’s exhortations, a passivity emphasized by the recurrence of the angel’s command—“This is the curse. Write”—at the end of each stanza. This conscientious unwillingness arising from an English poet’s recognition of various forms of moral prejudice in England enables her to bring the curse on American slavery.

The Angel in the poem acts as a mouthpiece for Browning who has given voice to her thoughts and forces her to write a curse. The curse in its true sense defines her own concern about what was going on in Victorian England and America. According to “The Bible” account of Creation, God has provided life to mankind by breathing his spirit into man, thus the spirit of God and the man is one. Our spirit is conveyed by the words we speak and thus has the potential to curse or bless. Our prayers are a mixture of words (beliefs), emotion (heart), intentions (will), and vision (imagination, spirit) that flows from our inner being. Our prayers will be effective for good if our inner being is filled with love, faith, joy and peace. Whereas, on the other hand, words spoken in hatred have murderous power and thus, our prayers are effective in doing harm and bringing negativity, if our inner being is filled with hate, pessimism, judgment and negative expectations. A curse thus includes negative emotions in someone’s inner being, directed against other in the form of words, and is intended to inflict harm or punishment on the desired person or object.

In the prologue of the poem, Browning expresses a kind of gratitude and indebtedness to America. She recognizes Americans as her compatriots and kinsperson and believes that their forefathers were once a part of England. The speaker’s acknowledgment “Bound by gratitude, / By love and blood, / To brothers of mine across the sea” (9-11) further illustrates the fact that America and Britain—the two major constituents of the Atlantic world (“Western Sea”)—are complicit in their heartless indifference towards the oppressed. Moreover, there is no dearth of arguments by which Browning has not shown her insolence and defiance to slavery in America. Her abolitionist claims are not located in the cry of a slave but preferably in the voice of a pure white Victorian woman. Glennis Byron has rightly remarked that Victorian women poets “tend

to sympathize more with their speakers than do Victorian male poets...for purposes of social critique" (*Dramatic Monologue*) than do their male counterparts. The hierarchical divisions of Victorian society consisted of white land-possessing males, beneath them were white non land-possessing males, pursued by white females and then slaves at the end. Americans were having very cold-blooded sentiment for slaves and treated them with extreme brutality. Browning has accused America of torturing the souls of slaves and says,

Because ye have broken your own chain

With the strain

Of brave men climbing a Nation's height,

Yet thence bear down with

brand and thong

On souls of others,—for this wrong

This is the curse. Write. (56-62)

Browning, instead of taking a haste decision says that she cannot curse America because England itself is suffering from the same political and social flaws. She gives her reason for not writing a curse to America as, "What curse to another land assign, when heavy-souled for the sins of mine?" (31-32) However, at last, the angel succeeds in compelling her to succumb to his desire and says, "Thou hast strength to see and hate/A foul thing done within thy gate." (35-37) The reasons that validate the curse against the Americans can equally be applied without moderation to the English. The Americans consider themselves as "Freedom's foremost acolyte," after getting free from British governance, but at the same time they have abused their freedom by obstinately maintaining the atrocious institution of slavery. The English that has cast off aristocratic rule and cherishes its socioeconomic independence is no different from the Americans in its demeanor toward the working-class whose wretched living conditions are identical to those of "bond-slaves" (53-64). Additionally, as the Americans "do the fiend's work perfectly" on their slaves, the English capitalists are equally guilty in their conduct towards the colonized subjects around the world whose labor comprises the backbone of Britain's economy.

In the second section of the poem where the matter of each curse is presented, the cursed are destined to a never-ending powerlessness, forced to "watch while kings conspire / Round the people's smouldering fire" (71-72) and will be fated to vulnerable silence, unable to exert their moral authority by expressing their resentment at the injustices they see. Even when they observe the "bloodhounds" justly overthrown by the people, their pang of conscience will force them into silence, unable to openly "favor the cause" (78-84), and the feeling of despair will intensify on hearing the prayers of the "good men" as they realize that they are the object on which "Christ

may avenge his elect / And deliver the earth” (92-94). Even when they speak, their speech will be inaudible: the objections they utter on witnessing “strong men draw / The nets of feudal law / To strangle the weak” (85-87) will be a stone hurled back, crippling their conscience and making their soul “sadder within” (89). Likewise, the moment they pride themselves on their “own charters kept true,” the feeling of shame will return, “for the thing which ye do / Derides what ye are” (102-104) and their own “conscience, tradition, and name / Explode with a deadlier blame” (109-110) than the worst of contempt their enemies might display. Taking into account Browning’s faith in the undividable association between virtuous governance and abolition of social injustice, the involuntary silence of the cursed in the face of national and international prejudice will obliterate their ethical influence and subvert their national and international hegemony. Furthermore, in the final stanza of the poem, the last curse dictates,

Go, wherever ill deeds shall be done,

Go, plant your flag in the sun

Beside the ill-doers! (113-15)

Regardless of the object of the curse, whether the Americans or the British, both “ill-doers” will always be paired on the same ground of sin.

In conjunction with the message against child exploitation, she again purposely uses her writing to include insight into her feminist perspective concerning the society under which she lived and wrote. The image which originated in the Victorian culture in England is undoubtedly universal, making women to make home a safe haven for her husband, where he could spiritually fortify himself before resuming the daily struggle of the work place, and for children, where they could receive the moral guidance needed to assume their own traditional roles in the adult world. An educated woman in a world dominated by men, had no opportunities to make use of her skills. Browning has seriously voiced the plight of female Victorian poets in these lines,

To curse choose men.

For I, a woman, have only known

How the heart melts and

the tears run down.(39-42)

Women absorb these stereotypical roles what society imposes on them and try to live accordingly. She also speaks about the over- emotionality of women as, “some women weep and curse/I say night and day.”(45-46) In the dominant conservative culture of the Victorian time, poetry was principally considered as the literary terrain of man and if women were to write poetry, they were only permitted to write about love, nature or pious religion-that is, nothing

that was perceived as intellectually demanding. Browning, however, has made an exception to sought her right of not only to be a poet, but to be a poet who dealt with key social and political issues of the day: war, nationalism, industrialization, slavery, religion, manipulation of power and the fight for liberty.

Another significant contribution of this poem is the portrayal of the distressed and distracted plight of poor children laboring in mines and manufactories. Child-labor was a widespread predicament in Victorian England and Browning has deliberately given an argument defining her emotional discomfort over ruined childhood for the sake of industrialization. She opens her heart's dilemma by saying,

Evermore My heart is sore

For my land's sins

for little feet of children bleeding across the street (17-19)

England just ideologically claims to be a free country while its children are unjustly being stripped of the rights of childhood. She also points out the wretched morality of Victorian people and accuses them by saying,

For parked up honors that gainsay-

The right of way:

For almsgiving through a door that is

Not open enough for two friends to kiss. (21-24)

At the same time she also questions the patriotism of Americans and remarks, "Patriot virtue starved to vice on self-praise, self-interest, and suspicion." (27-28). The plight of slaves in America was such that Americans, "keep calm footing all the time on writhing bond-slaves." (66-67) Browning has pointed out America's blindness and indifference towards the wretched plight and suffering of slaves in these words,

Ye shall watch while strong men

draw the nets of feudal law

To strangle the weak;

And counting the sin for a sin. (82-85)

She says that Americans have never, "utter the thought into flame" (79) in order to annihilate slavery and only watch as slaves struggle and die around them. Browning's main motive in this poem was not to criticize America particularly but to draw curtain from the social and political

evils of her country as well as America and the angel and the curse are only used by her as a medium to prove her political and ideological discussion of race, imperialism, tyranny and domination. The image of angel has been used by her in other poems also, such as in “The Seraphim and other Poems” (1838), but in this poem it stands for her own country or government. Browning declared herself true by saying that she has no personal hate towards America.

In this poem, Browning has revealed her feelings of indignation and outrage at the conditions of child laborers who were forced to endure in the mines and factories under the justification of economic progress. Furthermore, Browning was a female writer attempting to subtly unveil her strong opinions in the context of her poetry during the stifling Victorian age, making her contribution all the more important. Her main intention in this poem was not only to disparage America particularly but to warn England also about the social and political evils present in the country.

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