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**ATTITUDES TOWARDS FEMININITY IN ROBERT BROWNING'S
'MY LAST DUCHESS'**

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Abstract

'My Last Duchess' is one of the finest dramatic monologues written by Robert Browning. The poem depicts the patriarchy of the 19th-century Victorian society in which man manipulates woman following his own will and places them within the feminine regime. Although on the surface, the poem only represents a mural painting but upon reading it closely, it reveals the maltreatment of the women of Victorian society. The theory of Kate Millet has been applied to analyze Browning's selected poems. Textual analysis was used to approach the study in question. It was found that Browning has been a little ambivalent while treating women's nature; as he gives them a befitting thrashing but then at times he offers them a breathing space. Women were commodified, for example, the painting of the duchess. Women were taken for an object that is apparent from the Duke's frequent use of words like wall, piece, design, paint, curtain, representing his arrogant nature towards women. On the other hand, women too, play a role in exploiting men. We see that when the Duke treats gender he sways between the two extremes, but the value of men in Browning's outweighs that of women's.

Keywords: Robert Browning, My Last Duchess, Femininity, Attitude towards women

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Introduction

Literature being a social construct, there are few literary works that do not feature women. It does not matter whether that is a poem, essay, novel or any other literary genre, women would be part of it in some ways. Of course, the question of women's representation is inextricably linked with the way both the primary genders are conceived in relation to each other. The important issues are: how the women are represented; what powers have been denied and what have been delivered to them. Male dominance played a negative role in women's careers throughout the history of the world. Right from the Greek period, women were ghettoised and relegated to secondary status. Simone de Beauvoir quotes Aristotle in her *The Second Sex*, "The female is female by a certain lack of qualities". "We should regard women's nature as suffering from natural defectiveness"(de Beauvoir, 2010, p. 25). Women were (are) being persistently disenfranchised and denied basic human rights including the right to existence. However, the modern man gives more independence to women than a man in the past had given.

Analysis

The essay explores attitudes towards femininity in Browning's 'My Last Duchess'. The essay further explores the commodification and degradation of women. The essay applies the work of Kate Millet, 'Sexual Politics' (1970). Kate Millet rejects the belief established by science, religion, and law; the belief that patriarchy is the 'natural' basis for making a society. Her work aims at the diagnosis of 'patriarchy' and its negative implications on a woman that induces a woman's subjugation (Millet, 1970, p. 28). Millet criticizes the structure of a society that keeps an undue and excessive check on women as if they are infants. She further goes roundly against violence by male darts against female (43). Millet describes that "our social order is a birthright priority whereby males rule females" (p. 25). The duke uses this 'birthright' in the lineage of his aristocratic standard. The duke is a prisoner of his "aristocratic standards", says Dupras (1996, p. 3), which makes him feel his masculinity is endangered. Therefore, to retain that 'birthright' to rule, he kills the duchess.

Hawlin (2012, p. 148) explores "the philosophical problem of scepticism" concerning 'My Last Duchess'. He identifies a 'gap' between "what we can and cannot know of other minds" which translates into a "vulnerability that we often seek to transcend" (p. 148). His study is a very useful tool for an in-depth analysis of the poem 'My Last Duchess'. However, he mentions "other minds", which is a broader term. The essay explores this 'gap' in terms of gender difference. Being different genders, there is a difference between the thinking of the duke and the duchess. This leads the duke to a misapprehension regarding the duchess's real

character. The duke grows suspicious of the duchess's open-heartedness and her lively manners and subsequently, puts her to a grisly death. The duke says,

...Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,

Whene'er, I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile (43-46)

These lines depict the duke's suspicion of his wife; he is a jealous soul and cannot comprehend the duchess's warm feelings towards others. He wants her to be reserved solely for himself, which is a kind of narrow-mindedness in the duke's personality. The duke is egotistic and does not suspend his ego. As Crowder (2012, p. 91) notes, the duke "fails to grasp the basic distinction between a person and the painting of a person." He stays blind to reality. He is a person who stays oblivious to the world around him. This creates the "gap", Hawlin mentions above. A point can be made about the "curtain" that hangs before the portrait, it represents a symbolic gap between the duke's perception and reality. The curtain represents a symbolic impediment between their understandings. We may also say, the curtain is not there on the portrait but it is there on his eyes, which has blurred his outlook. And 'This grew; I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together' (45-46). The word "grew" is to be taken into the wider context of the duke's 'castration anxiety' presented by Sarnoff and Corwin (p. 374). Sarnoff's statement is about the castration anxiety of infants, particularly their fear of penile circumcision. However, here, castration anxiety is applied to the duke's fear of deprivation of his masculinity, social status, and power.

The duke feels insecure and senses family disgrace at the hands of the duchess. He then puts her to unjustified death. John (1932) links this murder with the code of honour of dukedom by which, 'the duke may have feared a disgrace to

the family honour at the hands of the duchess'. As Rea mentions, the real duke on whom Browning modelled the protagonist of this catastrophe would repeat a sentence:

The wife of a great man will not only be free from wrongdoing but also from any suspicion of wrong doing (p. 120).

The duke not only kills the duchess but also stereotypes the males who deny the basic right of existence to a woman. The protagonist of the murder seems to ape Wollstonecraft's (1993) verdict almost literally when she says, "Love, considered as an animal appetite, cannot long feed on itself without expiring. And this extinction in its own flame, may be termed the violent death of love" (p. 81). The murder of the duchess for a very unjustifiable reason is an example of women's poor treatment in the Victorian society of the 19th century. This is not the only example of a woman being killed by a man in Browning's poetry. In 'Porphyria's Lover', another woman (Porphyria) is put to death for trespassing the restrictions imposed by the self-will of her lover. In 'Porphyria's Lover' and in 'My Last Duchess', there is a thematic similarity of murder and denial of power to women. Porphyria's case is a bit different; she is between two grinding stones of a mill: the overwhelming domestic restraints on her sex and the imposition of her lover's will upon her. As Maenhout (2007) writes in a dissertation that "[Porphyria's] lover wants to preserve the moment and her love for him by strangling her throat" (p. 25). The lover succeeded in preserving her love at the cost of her life.

In one long yellow string I wound Three times her little throat around, and strangled her. (39-41)

So, she is done by the imposition of her lover's will. Rampton (2007) is right to say, if women exert too much pressure or power on males, the males then rush to use their phallic power to put women in their rightful place.

The painting of the duchess is the living embodiment of the idea of women's commodification. Victorian men used women as toys to imagine their insolent selves in them, pointed out in an essay by Lineszy-Overt on (2000, p. 5), explaining the "masculine women" that the next duchess (whom the duke intends to marry) too will become an object on the wall as lifeless as the last duchess. Duke's frequent use of words referring to inanimate things, such as object, wall, piece, design, curtain, paint, and the next duchess as an object, blatantly represents his arrogant nature, his material love, and his gender-discriminatory attitude. He looks down upon women as trifling creatures.

The power stays with the duke and he makes a vain attempt to manipulate the duchess. The duchess is treated only as a mural painting. Even the language the duke uses is sarcastic. The duchess's heart is represented as a child's heart.

...She had A heart— how shall I say? —too soon made glad, Too easily impressed; (21-23).

The painting represents an insipid picture of the duchess, in the sense that the duke wanted her to be serious and stoic to others. She is more a thing than a human soul. The lines 'Notice Neptune, though, /Taming a sea-horse,' (54-55), yet another painting, in which the duke considers himself something supreme or above-human, whereas the duchess is appraised as an aquatic animal, or a docile and submissive character possessing no reason. 'Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed /At starting, is my object' (52-3), these lines indicate the treatment of

the becoming duchess as an object. It serves as proof of women's maltreatment and their use as material object. The duke is thirsty for power and family status. Woman for him is solely the vehicle of his will. He changes the wives like dresses, as Rea mentions, 'the duke was married three times' (p. 120). He only wants to keep his family name alive; a family that is nine-hundred-year-old, he is indifferent to the status and dignity of women.

As Domhnall (1992) says, in 'My Last Duchess' the poem 'There is a lack of any love expression' (p. 75), Mitchel's comment is true for the duke's heart which has no vacuum for love but violence. The complete exclusion of human love from the poem suggests human degradation. However, if we apply it to the duchess only, it shows women's degradation. Nevertheless, if one is eager to explore any love lurking in the poem; it is the love for power, social status, and ego. The duke's stubbornness is reflected in the kind of choices he makes; the choices which prioritize his ego over someone's life. "E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose/ Never to stoop." (43-44).

One regrettable point in the duke's personality is his self-love. His lack of contemplative morose over the duchess's murder is a sign of misfortune for the next wife (the duchess to be). It ensures she will suffer the same fate as the deceased duchess. And which is more she would be a lifeless picture representing the creation of the demigod. The duke shows no signs of repentance and instead advances to marry another wife. He is shared in the same feelings by the speaker of 'Porphyria's Lover' who, like the duke, is relaxed and calm. Both seem indifferent to the consequences. Porphyria's lover goes a step forward by saying that even "...God has not said a word" (p. 60), justifying the cause for his action.

Both the Duke and Porphyria's lover show no sign of regression, thus, annihilating the last vestige of woman's significance in their lives, and in effect, in the life of Victorian society. This attitude jeopardizes women's security and basic right of living.

However, Browning is not blind to the other side of the picture in which men suffer under empowered women. By contrast, there is ample evidence in 'Andrea del Sarto' where the artist, Andrea del Sarto, struggles against the passivity of his wife. He is the victim of his wife's coldness towards him and his profession. Lucrezia, Saltro's wife, manipulates him completely and exercises her power of beauty over him. Saltro vehemently blames her for divesting him of his actual potential to become a spiritual artist and emulate Rafael. Her demands in life grew so much that he had to undergo the guilty action of betraying the king, Francis. In 'Andrea del Slatro' he remonstrates that his wife did not support him in attaining the heights on which other renowned artists stand. He says in 'Andrea del Saltro', 'Had you enjoined them on me, given me soul, /We might have risen to Rafael, I and you (117-118).

Appeasing her, he loses both his talent and honor. He does not do justice to his artistic profession. He laments for the lost glory at the court of Francis. 'A good time, was it not, my kingly days? /And had you not grown restless—but I know—, (164-65), these lines reflect his feelings over that embezzlement he did some time ago, and he accuses her that it was she who prompted him for doing so. Being manipulative, Lucrezia reduces and limits the scope of her husband's life. His profession is reduced to commercial interest for paying her debts. In the essay

as mentioned above, the speaker of 'Porphyria's Lover' and the duke kill the women. However, 'Andrea del Salto' presents an entirely different picture. He loses the patriarchal power to control her. He gives in to her wish. Even in the conclusive line of the poem, he goes to the extent that he allows his wife to meet her cousin. 'Again the Cousin's whistle! Go, my Love.' (269).

Conclusion

It is inferred from the discussion and arguments that Browning's women are trolled in his poems. We may conclude that the murder of the duchess and Porphyria is not simply another incident of murder but another example of women's degradation in a phallogocentric society. However, this is not true that in Browning's monologues only men exploit women but women also exploit men. The Victorian men kept a very hard and rigid attitude towards women. Already, women had been demoralized at that time, but Browning's men in particular and Victorian men, in general, kept a very strong watch on women and made them the mirrors of their own selves and identity. The essay points out that the dismal killing of both the women blatantly demonstrates that these are not simply murders but the death of the entire womenfolk, limiting their sphere of articulation and denaturing their womanhood.

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