

“The last Duchess” by Robert Browning, a mirror to condition of women in Victorian society

Manisha Choudhary

Department of English, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

Abstract

This research paper examines some issues related to the condition of women in Victorian society and how the issues taken up are still relevant in contemporary times using the poem “The Last Duchess” by Robert Browning. Various aspects of female oppression considered in the research paper, like the way society become intolerant and accuse women at every step if they wish to lead a free life and breaks the "codes" set by the society, finds its parallelism in Tarabai Shinde's text "A Comparison between Women and Men". So, Shinde's text is used to substantiate various feminist points. Also, the cruelty in matrimonial relations is brought to limelight using this poem.

The paper is successful in highlighting the feminist aspects of the dramatic monologue poem and also of the Victorian society in general where women were treated as sex objects and they had access to domestic domain only. Men had full control over activities of their wives. Such condition of women in the reign of woman ie. Queen Victoria is quite ironic.

Keywords: victorian society, the last duchess

Introduction

During Victorian era position of women was not very glorious their main duty, which gave them recognition, was to marry and raise children. They have almost none or very limited role to play outside the house. Queen Victoria was herself surrounded by her loving husband named Albert and had many children. She represented the epitome of femininity which was based on housekeeping, marriage and motherhood. She became the icon of the middle class society of late 19th century. When industrialisation rose in Britain it gave domestic role to women and the responsibility of business, politics and commerce was left on male counterparts. So, women became triumphers in domestic domains. The ideal women of this era were the weak passive creature who had no identity of her own and was living as per the rules set by her husband. Women's body was objectified and they were made to wear corsets. The corsets and large skirts were fashionable but they also constrained their physical movements. It was difficult to move freely wearing corsets that made it hard to breathe, and heavy fabrics impeded their movement. No wonder that those women were prone to fainting, headaches and also to 'hysteria'. Girls were groomed in a way that they get an ideal husband and their only role was to raise children. They were put on the show like race horses and men of the times can choose from many, only the beautiful ones could get a rich husband. Women were like property as is seen in the Browning's poem. Husbands had no respect for their wives, for them, they just had ornamental roles. They were objects of male pleasure and were meant to be faithful to her husband even if the husband is cheating all the time on her.

The Last Duchess by Robert Browning is based on incidents in the life of Alfonso, Duke of Ferrara. The poem shows a rich duke's opinion on his wife's death using dramatic monologue. He shows the portrait of his late wife to a visitor and the way he describes her pictured countenance shows that he treats his wife as a mere object. Duke, the psychotic character can be

seen as a representative of the entire male race who have been subjugating women counterparts in one way or other. The Duke seems to praise the life like portrait of his last duchess more than his wife in reality when she was alive. Even the piece of art is given more importance than the life of women. This shows how Duchess was treated even lesser than an object of art.

"That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive I call,
That piece a wonder" (Browning 52)

Such subjugation of women is not specific to Duke alone or to Victorian era alone. In Victorian era there was rise in immoral activities i.e. theft, prostitution etc. also there was the rise in orthodoxy. Women even in contemporary times face subjugation and exploitation at hands of men in patriarch society. Every day we see news flashing our TV screens depicting crimes committed on women. Art forms are mirrors of society they reflect what is present in the society of contemporary time of writer. So, dukes behaviour must be similar to ways in which women, in general, were treated during his times. Though the situation of women in contemporary era may not be as bad as it was in duchess's era still they are not seen as equal to men.

Duke is enraged by the behaviour of Duchess. According to him his wife had frivolous nature and could be impressed easily by anyone. Her appreciation of common activities like riding white mule round the terrace, or her appreciation of behaviour of a worker who brings a bunch of cherries for her from the garden, is disliked by her husband. Duke wanted his wife as his sole property who can not even smile at her own will. He wants to possess her like an object and to control her every activity. Riding of mule round terrace shows that she was not allowed to go for a horse ride outside the palace. Duke was enraged because Duchess was

"Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere."
(Browning 53)

And also the Duke was empowered by his "one hundred years old name" ie. His family prestige along with him being a male. "It means he enjoys two sorts of power: one comes from his money, and other just because he's a man. There is nothing to hold him back!" (Shinde 137)

He thinks that in marrying Duchess Duke has done her a favour, as during the Victorian times marriage was the only achievement for girls, and according to him she didn't value his, this gift more than the gift of a bunch of cherries from the orchard by an official fool. And when his ego was dismantled by such behaviour of the Duchess, he does not complaint about it to his wife but he rather orders her execution. Such cold blooded murder of own wife clearly shows that Duke has no feeling of love for his wife. He treats her like an object who has no identity of its own and is known by one who possesses it.

"This grew; I gave commands
Then all smiles stopped together" (Browning 54)

These lines reflect Duke's blunt and emotionless personality. When his wife is executed, he not even gives a hint of sorrow on her death, rather he is planning to remarry. This time before fixing his marriage he shows the count the painting of his last duchess and what behaviour of her has led to her death so that he can warn his to be wife to avoid such behaviour otherwise she will also meet the same fate. Indirectly he also asks for dowry by saying that the kingdom of the father of his new wife is magnificent and can give anything in dowry but he wants only their daughter.

"The count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed
Though his fair daughter's self as I avowed
At starting is my object" (Browning 53)
He here refers to his next wife an object.
"To you, women is just some utterly trivial form of life,
like a louse or a flea." (Shinde 136)

The way he treats and talks about women shows what cold hearted creature he is. For him, wife seems to be good only for sexual pleasures and possession and they can not even dare to smile against his wishes. And if they go against his wishes she will meet the similar end as his last duchess.

Also the cruel practice of dowry and remarriage is also referred in the poem by Browning. Tarabai Shinde also talks about the way in which men in our society marry again right after the death of their earlier wife. In Indian society, men remarry even before the pyre of his wife gets cold whereas if women's husband dies she will have to live a miserable life. Tarabai Shinde in her A Comparison Between Women and Men also questions that "Why don't you hide your faces when your wives have died, shave off your beards and moustaches and go off to live in wilderness for rest of your lives?"(Shinde 135) For a man to remarry the only requirement is that he should have good name and wealth just like the Duke of Browning's poem. Age of men is no bar in such societies. in such societies

as was present at the reign of Duke and also in the contemporary Indian society women don't have many rights whereas men even have right to murder his wife if she goes against his wishes as is done by Duke of Ferrara. Even if the man is aged he can still remarry an eighteen years old virgin. Though now the condition of women in this aspect is improving and women do have a say in their marriage.

"what nonsense sir, who says you're old? If anyone dares say so, ill push their teeth in' 'but look' the old man says, 'what about my hair?' doesn't that spoil it? No, no- you just take a bit of this cream, sir, rub it on, and tomorrow it'll look fine" " but my teeth – there is not even a trace of one left in my head. no problem, my dear sir tomorrow I'll go along to a doctor I know who deals in teeth and I'll get you a brand new set, a full thirty-two." (Shinde 137-138)

This shows the extent of male chauvinism in our society and how in this male are seen as without any defect and women if they smile as per their own wishes they are ordered dead.

The Last Duchess reveals the history, character, situation, past, present and future. Some critics say that the poem is about mad love but my conscience is not able to trace the element of love in this poem rather to me it is more a mirror to the condition of women in Victorian society. Duchess here is representative of entire female race during Victorian times. The poem also reveals the future as women are even today treated as second class citizens in most of the societies. Though the treatment today is not as harsh as was given to Duchess of Ferrara.

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