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Representation of Victorian Society in the Poetry of Mary Howitt

Representación de la sociedad victoriana en la poesía de Mary Howitt

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses Mary Howitt's position as a representative poet of the victorian age. There are various other poets such as Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Browning, Charlotte Bronte, Matthew Arnold, Shelley, Wordsworth, and George Eliot who represented and portrayed the varied conditions of victorian life. There are logical analysis and development of the poems. Appropriate theoretical frameworks have been incorporated whenever required. Based on discussion and interpretation, the researcher concludes that Mary Howitt can be well considered to be one of the representative poets of the victorian age. She has successfully rendered the darker side of victorian life.

Keywords: Mary Howitt, modernism, poetry, romanticism, victorian age.

RESUMEN

El artículo analiza la posición de Mary Howitt como poetisa representativa de la época victoriana. Hay varios otros poetas como Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Browning, Charlotte Bronte, Matthew Arnold, Shelley, Wordsworth y George Eliot que representaron y retrataron diversas condiciones de la vida victoriana. Hay análisis lógicos y desarrollo de los poemas. Se han incorporado marcos teóricos apropiados siempre que sea necesario. Basándose en la discusión y la interpretación, el investigador concluye que Mary Howitt puede ser considerada una de las poetisas representativas de la época victoriana. Ha interpretado con éxito el lado más oscuro de la vida victoriana.

Palabras clave: Época victoriana, Mary Howitt, modernismo, poesía, romanticismo.

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INTRODUCTION

Queen Victoria's reign marks a progressive change in the history of England, especially in education, science, and technology. The scientific advancement influenced Victorian society which, in turn, altered every form of art in England. Victorian literature reflected the attitudinal change of English society. In her book *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Maureen Moran (2006) aptly comments that Victorian society "simultaneously celebrated and disappointed itself, and that tension colours all aspects of Victorian culture, including its literary output". Due to improved educational facilities, the reading public increased in number, and the demand for literary works created an array of writing careers. Fresh writers sprouted up. The well-renowned, as well as the budding writers of the Victorian period, illuminated the different aspects of their contemporary life. Some were inspired by the technical advancements, and others were pained by the marred life.

The Victorian period was an era of transition from Romanticism to Modernism. Romantic Literature featured mostly rural life, which had a strong bond with nature. On the contrary, Modernism is about the growing urban setup. Every genre of Victorian Literature, especially poetry, highlights this shifting. Victorian poetry has the features of both Romanticism and Modernism. Armstrong (2002), Emeritus Professor of English at Birkbeck, in *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poets and Politics*, writes, "...Victorian poetry is seen in terms of transition. It is on the way somewhere. It is either on the way from Romantic poetry or on the way to modernism. It is situated between two kinds of excitement..."

Poetry is the vehicle that used to connect societal members in their social, political, economic, and religious wellbeing of the people (Mwangi: 2019, pp.61-77). Poets like Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Browning, Charlotte Bronte, Matthew Arnold, Shelley, Wordsworth, George Eliot, Mary Howitt, and many others depicted the varied conditions of Victorian life. Tennyson's poems contained almost every detail of the era. The topics ranged from romance, nature, to political and religious criticisms. For example, his poem *In Memoriam* describes his feelings of desire, love, and loss. Another major writer, Robert Browning, also portrayed the dark side of Victorian life. His works were known for irony, dark humour, effective characterization, and social commentary (Peterson: 1998, pp.31-54).

Not just men, but women too took up the writing profession. Though their journey was tough, they managed to portray different themes and topics. In the beginning, the literary works written by women were blindly rejected. They were subjected to harsh criticism. Some women writers wrote under male pen-names: Mary Ann Evans wrote under the name George Eliot. Gradually, women writers gained popularity. The literary works of women had unique perspectives. New dimensions of the Victorian society were expressed. Some of the prominent women writers were Elizabeth Browning, George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte, etc. (Johnston: 2020, pp.54-64).

METHODOLOGY

Many researchers including Asen (2020) and Darmastuti et al. (2019) found in their research that self-identity is an essential condition for individuals and communities to survive and thrive peacefully with a sense of satisfaction. Recognizing and maintaining self-identity is important as it makes aware of our immediate environment and our place in it and equips us with what we need to live out that purpose. Mary Botham Howitt (1799 – 1888) is one of these women writers who strived to earn identity. Her life in England was troublesome. She felt a sort of bitterness and disappointment. In the second volume of her autobiography, Mary Howitt gives a hint about her life in England in the very first paragraph. She says, "On our return to England in April 1843, I was full of energy and hope. Glowing with aspiration, and in the enjoyment of great domestic happiness, I was anticipating a busy, perhaps overburdened, but nevertheless congenial life. It was, however, to be one of darkness, perplexity, and discouragement" (Howitt & Howitt: 2011). Her first-hand experience in England made her understand the core reality. This experience shaped her poetry (Hetherington: 2020).

RESULTS

Mary Botham Howitt was born to Samuel Botham and Anne on 12 March 1799 at Coleford, Gloucestershire. She was educated at home. From her very tender age, she was a voracious reader. Her writing career began when she was very young. She was married to William Howitt on 16 April 1821. William was once a pharmacist, but later gave up his business and began writing along with his wife. He had authored over 180 books in collaboration with Mary Howitt. They acquainted with other prominent writers like William Wordsworth, Charles Dickens, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Mary Howitt was also a prolific translator. She had translated many of Hans Christian Andersen's *Fairy Tales and Other Stories*. In the second volume of her autobiography, Howitt writes, "I shall be able to send thy children a book at Christmas which they will like, I hope. It is 'The Child's Picture and Verse Book,' which I have translated from the German work commonly called 'Otto Speckter's Fable-Book.'" (Howitt & Howitt: 2011) She was well-recognized for her poem *The Spider and the Fly*. Her other works included *The Heir of West Way lan*, *Drawing-room Scrap Book*, *The Cost of Caergwyn*, *The Coming Spring*, *The Sea Flower*, etc.

Howitt's poetry covered a wide range of subjects and styles. Her effective illustration of nature and humanity made her works special (North: 2019, pp.45). Miles (2011) states precisely in the essay "Critical and Biographical Essay by Alexander Hay Japp on Mary Howitt (1799–1888)" that Mary Howitt's poetical works vary through a wide range. She treated many subjects and essayed many styles, but one note may be found in all—a delightful naturalness, and a graceful fancy. She had the gift of vision; she clearly painted what she saw, and on fitting occasions could command apt and striking figures. She was free from one of the great faults of the earlier school—she knew no affectations.

The expression of her thoughts was effective and prolific. One could visualize what is described in her poetry. This paper attempts to analyse Howitt's poems "The Sunshine" and "The Unregarded Toils of the Poor" to understand the effect of the urban culture on nature. The poems are simple in style and deeper in meaning. They decry the effects of changing Victorian society. The people who once romanticised nature are exploiting it in the name of science and technology. The hypnotising urban life narrowed the thoughts of society.

The Victorian period is known for its explorations and discoveries. The rapid growth of industrialisation improved the standards of the people, and the nation's welfare was the main focus of the authority. With its modern outlook, peacefulness, prosperity, and sensibility, the Victorian advancements overshadowed the darker side (Hansord: 2019, pp.98-111).

DISCUSSION

The first poem which is under discussion here is Mary Howitt's "The Sunshine". "The Sunshine" condemns that darker side. It highlights the Victorian society's diminishing gratitude towards nature and the impact of industrialisation. It is a beautiful narration of nature's life-giving light, the sunshine. This poem has seven four-lined stanzas. Howitt's alluring description of sunshine gives an entirely new perspective. Victorian life moved faster due to technological advancement, and the attitude of the people began to shrink. They were not interested in admiring the beauty of nature, which was once a part of their life. Luxurious town life haunted the minds of society (Hughes: 2017, pp.273-294).

In the first stanza of the poem, Howitt says how the sunshine spread everywhere: "I love the sunshine everywhere – / Inwood, and field, and glen; / I love it in the busy haunts / Of town-imprison'd men" (Lines 1-4) (Howitt: 2010) "The Sunshine". The freshness of sunshine was nature's gift to man. It was not biased and showered its rays everywhere. Be it the woods or the field or the valley, and the sun shone the same. The

money seeking urban crowd also received the same sunshine which freshened their day. People had changed, but the sunshine was the same (Harrington: 2018, pp.369-375).

Howitt then describes how the sunshine peeped in "The humble cottage door, / And casts the chequered casement shade/ Upon the red-brick floor" (Lines 6-8) (Howitt: 2010). This description includes a vivid visual image. The depiction of the type of the door, the design of the shade and the colour of the floor shows Howitt's involvement in observing the scenario (Yulanda & Sepdanius: 2019, pp.40-49). The sunshine also refreshed the little ones who explored among the "clover grass", the golden-green beetle which moved among the braided roots. The children were so innocent, and they enjoyed playing in the fields. Their attitude had not changed, and they revelled in nature. They were not aware of the changes around them, and nature also tried to keep them happy.

The sunshine beautified even the sea, where the sail and the oar danced with it. The jumping waves which touched the shore seemed like "molten glass" due to the glancing Sun. The lines, "I love it, on the breezy sea, / To glance on sail and oar, / While the great waves, like molten glass, / Come leaping to the shore" (Lines 13-16) (Howitt, 2010) "The Sunshine" mesmerises the readers with its splendid image. The words itself create the image of a seashore where the waves kiss the shore. The seawater was as clear as molten glass. The waves shone when the sun's rays fell on them (Liedke: 2018, pp.109-143). The sun's brightness extended from land to open field, to the sea and also reached the mountain top. The snow on the mountain top awaited the sun's light to get melted in the warmth of the sun. The snow bathed in the light and gave up its hardness. Just like the kindness and happiness that dwelt in the face of the people, the sunshine dwelt on the earth. Howitt says that she loved sunshine as it was "Like kindness, or like mirth, / Upon a human countenance, / Is sunshine on the earth" (lines: 22-24) (Howitt:2010) "The Sunshine".

The final stanza is a summation of the previous stanzas. The last lines are as follows: "Upon the earth - upon the sea - / And through the crystal air - / Or piled-up-clouds - the gracious sun / Is glorious everywhere" (Lines 25-28) (Howitt: 2010) "The Sunshine". The "gracious sun" strengthened the earth, the sea, the atmosphere, and the clouds with its glorious light. Each and everything got freshness from sunshine and became one with it. With it, everything was bright and beautiful, and without it, life became dull and dark.

This poem also reminds us of the crooked mindset of Victorian society. Money-making was the prime desire of the period. Technical advancements drove people away from nature, and the sense of oneness began to fade. One's self became a priority. With a gradual degradation of humanity, there was a breach in the relationship between nature and mankind. Nature's beauty lost its charm among the selfish mob. Victorian society did not want to admire nature and was hypnotised by new scientific discoveries. This poem could also be taken as a dedication to nature's life-giving divine light.

Another poem of Mary Howitt, "The Unregarded Toils of the Poor" depicts the disintegrating humanity of the Victorian period. It also symbolises the broken religious faith. This poem has three stanzas. The first stanza is four-lined; the second is ten-lined; the third is eight-lined. The poem is about the complicated Victorian society. During the Victorian era, industries and factories hired poor people for work. Slave trade was more prevalent among traders. People were treated as objects, and they were traded from one place to another. Due to the increasing population in Victorian England, poverty began to take a toll on the working-class. In order to maintain their livelihood, they began to work hard. Many were taken as slaves to toil under their inhumane masters. Throughout the poem, Howitt explains the pains of the poor and concludes with a satisfying note that there is God to hear their cries and to protect them.

The first stanza of the poem highlights the sad part of the technically advanced Victorian society. It is as follows: "Alas! what secret tears are shed, / What wounded spirits bleed; / What loving hearts are Sundered / And yet man takes no heed!" (Lines 1-4) (Howitt:2010) "The Unregarded Toils of the Poor". The very first word itself shows that the growth of Victorian society has led to some sort of grief. The phrase 'secret tears' represent the hidden struggles of the people. Outwardly, one seemed to be happy for the sake of the nation's welfare. But on the inside, there were untold pains which broke their heart and soul. In the fast-moving modern

era, people had no time to notice each other's pain. Tears might be shed, spirits might bleed, and loving hearts might be separated, but there was no one to take care of those in need and pain.

Life had become so mechanical that the joy of togetherness had gone. People were running a mad race and gave up all happy moments to live a luxurious life. The rich and the capitalists took pleasure in "oil and wine", whereas the working-class had to toil for their livelihood. The poor people were taken as bonded labourers. They were treated as slaves. They had to dig out coal from mines. During the Victorian period, coal mining was done manually. Coal was the main source of power. It was used for driving machines, trains, and for cooking. Poor people toiled in coal mines to earn a little money. Child labour was also common. Children of very tender age were taken for working in coal mines, factories, and chimney sweeping. They had to do hazardous jobs for more hours. Their wages were very low, but they worked for almost 12 hours per day. They were allowed to take only a few breaks and toil in the coal mines without any fresh air. The health and safety of the workers were never considered. The mine owners just wanted to hoard up money. They bothered only about profits. Children were also taken as domestic servants. Their joys of childhood were burnt down by poverty, and they were deprived of education (Cholewa et al.:2019, pp.136–146).

The workers in the mines had to "turn for him the mazy wheel" and "delve for him the mine!" (Line 9, 10) (Howitt: 2010) "The Unregarded Toils of the Poor". The small children had to do heavy tasks without any rest. The owners did not even bother about the children, who "In noisy factories dim, / That all day long, lean, pale, and faint, / Do heavy tasks for him!" (Lines 12-14) (Howitt: 2010) "The Unregarded Toils of the Poor". The owners and capitalists were least bothered about the welfare of these children. Those children had to work very hard even at a tender age. They did not get enough nutrition and started growing pale and lean. There was none to seek justice for their well-being.

The toiling poor were no different than stones that were under the feet of the authority. "To him they are but as the stones/ Beneath his feet that lie." (Lines 15-16) (Howitt: 2010) "The Unregarded Toils of the Poor". Moreover, it never pricked the inhumane hearts of the authority. The poor did not realise that they were seeking sympathy from hardcore money hoarders for whom humans were no better than stones. Their need for care and sympathy "entereth not his thoughts" (Line 17) (Howitt: 2010) "The Unregarded Toils of the Poor" (Martinez: 2017).

Those in power did not even think that there is a superpower watching over everything. Howitt completes the poem with the following lines. "It entereth not his thoughts that God / Heareth the sufferer's groan, / That in His righteous eye their life / Is precious as his own." (Lines 19-22) (Howitt: 2010) "The Unregarded Toils of the Poor". Authoritative people forgot that there is God to help those in misery and pain. The Almighty's presence had been left behind. There is God to hear the groans and cries of the poor. To His righteous eyes, their life was so precious.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this poem, Howitt exposes the tough and painful life of the poor. The owners and capitalists saw only the profit leaving behind love and affection. They failed to take care of the ones who worked hard for them. Without the toiling poor, their luxury was impossible; yet, they abandoned their cry for sympathy. Be it the grown-ups or children, and everyone were the same in front of the authority. The filthy rich grew richer, blindfolding themselves towards the poor. Another stream of thought running behind the poem is the disintegrating faith in the Almighty. With the change in lifestyle, culture and morality, religious beliefs began to crumble. Especially after the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, people began to doubt their religious faith. They started questioning everything, and this resulted in utter chaos.

Though the Victorian period seemed to be a very prosperous and peaceful one, there was a lot of unrest among the lower strata of people. The advancements and immense development shadowed the darker side of the Victorian period. The industrial revolution made people seek fortune in every possible way. They were

mesmerized by the novelty of technical advancements. Long admired nature was abandoned by its own people. Simple and joyful life became mechanical and complex. Mary Botham Howitt has beautifully rendered that darker side of Victorian life. Her poems "The Sunshine" and "The Unregarded Toils of the Poor" are just examples of her marvellous poetic rendition. Through simple words and illustrations, she has presented the complexity of Victorian life. Scientific developments and technical advancements are essential for an easy life, but the human relationship is much more important for a happy living. Howitt thus paints the negative impact of urbanisation in her poems. Her anguish over the loss of humanity and religious faith is the key concept in both the poems. Distressing urban life has completely shattered the life of togetherness.

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