

THE ART OF ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING: A POETIC SAGA OF COLONIZED AUTHORSHIP

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‘Postcolonialism’ appeared in the context of decolonization, that marked the second half of the 20th century, and has been appropriated by contemporary critical discourse in a wide range of domains mapped by at least half a dozen disciplines. However, in spite of some two decades of definitional debates, this term remains a fuzzy concept stretching from a strictly historical definition to the more encompassing and controversial sphere of its contemporary kin-terms similarly prefixed by a morpheme that indicates temporal succession while suggesting transcending perspectives (‘poststructuralism’, ‘postmodernism’ and the like).

Indeed, on the one hand, the ‘postcolonial’ may refer to the status of a land that is no longer colonized and has regained its political independence (e.g., postcolonial India). In this sense, ‘postcolonialism’ will pertain to the set of features (economic, political, social, etc.) which characterizes these countries and the way in which they negotiate their colonial heritage, given the fact that long periods of forced dependence necessarily had a profound impact on the social and cultural fabric of these societies (the postcolonial condition). It may also apply to the former colonizers inasmuch as the fact that both extended contacts with the alien societies they conquered, and the eventual loss of these profitable possessions deeply influenced the course of their economic and cultural evolution.

On the other hand, ‘postcolonialism’ may designate, and denounce, the new forms of economic and cultural oppression that have succeeded modern colonialism, sometimes called ‘neo-colonialism’. The term tends to point out that cooperation, assistance, modernization and the like are in fact new forms of political and cultural domination as pernicious as the former imperial colonialism or colonial imperialism was or, in other words, the devaluation of autochthonous ways of life and their displacement by the ethos of dominant nations which are technologically more advanced. Obviously, these two senses are intimately linked but foreground different aspects of a single process – the cultural homogenization of ever larger areas of the globe.

This process raises several kinds of conceptual and pragmatic problems. One of the most challenging of them is to understand the historical conditions in which this new analytical tool emerged and how the epistemological impact of the latter transformed policies and practices not only in the academic agenda and beyond, but also in the management of representation. Crucial questions in this respect bear upon the source of the authoritative voices as to whether they originate among the former colonizers or the former colonized and using whose discourse, whether they use the rhetoric of atonement or the rhetoric of resentment and whether they promote strategies of true empowerment or opportunistic strategies of protracted control.

Another important issue is the extent to which the contemporary notions of colonialism and postcolonialism can legitimately help conceptualize all past forms of colonization and their political, economic and cultural consequences. Are these notions valid epistemological tools to understand the past better? Do such conceptual extensions result in defusing the ethical questioning of modern European colonization? Does the postcolonial discourse describe 'normal' processes of cultural change through conquest and domination or does it engage human responsibility in the novel context of global awareness? Can multi-voiced reassessments of history impact upon the present or is the critical discourse of postcolonialism a mere epiphenomenon that is a symptom of broader and deeper interacting forces?

For more than three decades, the study of postcolonial literature has continued to flourish as an important aspect of English literary studies. The number of dedicated positions that have been advertised in recent years, the number of graduate students exploring the field, the popularity of journals, and the international conferences all reflect the growing awareness of an interest in postcolonial studies. Such a discourse has now thus emerged as an interdisciplinary effort to link cultural studies and contemporary theory to the history of imperialism.

While the enthusiasm has remained consistent over this period of time, there have also been moments of concern as scholars have offered different paradigms to encapsulate this heterogeneous body of material. Regional and national models, for instance, and a wide range of approaches – historical, mythographical, anthropological etc. – have been considered in order to contextualize this field of inquiry and foreground it in a manner that expresses in myriad forms. In pedagogical terms, the tendency has been to draw from a variety of disciplines, such as history, anthropology and ethnography, in order to explain the differences that exist among postcolonial literatures. In short, the response to postcolonial literature has been eclectic and, often, quite ambivalent.

Notwithstanding what has been discussed above in relation to postcoloniality and its modern-day literary and other interdisciplinary manifestations and practices, I would, in this paper, like to look at the echoes of colonial experience in the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the nineteenth-century woman poet, who refused to succumb to the strong and dominating voice of the male writer who, in his turn, denied her a place in the 'literary marketplace' at the time she was writing. Though Barrett Browning was then writing in England, a country taken to be 'belonging' to the colonized, the 'anxiety' of women lay in the fact of their double colonization – a fact that was perhaps universally felt and experienced by all women irrespective of geographical or demographic boundaries. In case of those women who did not (or do not) fit into the neat categories of subjugation, the overwhelming structures of family, traditional morality and societal norm are enough to straitjacket and force them into subservient subject positions. Any attempts on their part towards self-assertion or affirmation are largely – and in so-called liberated and democratically designed spaces, deliberately – perceived as a result of 'mis-placed' feminism. The paper takes up Barrett Browning's literature with a view to bringing to the fore a conventionally perceived non-canonical body of writing in confrontation with blatant social issues concerning male chauvinism, sexist bias, psychological and even physical exploitation, hegemonistic inclinations in not merely the male, but also the female, sections of the society and an utter disregard for women's psychological, cultural, familial and spiritual quests. Predictably enough, the ways out, suggested subtly or propagated more avowedly, have ranged from mild protest, seeking accommodation through moderation, love and persuasion to carving out of a self-sufficient exclusivist self.

Marginalization and exclusion however have often encouraged oppressed groups to use literature for their own purposes unsanctioned by the literary institutions. But in spite of such a consideration, women have been more actively involved in literary products than in many other areas of cultural production. This is the reason why women's writing has long had more of a foothold within the literary paradigm than other types of marginalized writing. This is due to the existence of immensely gifted, yet often unrecognized and unexplored, writers, recognized as part of a significant artistic tradition, who are women.

The claim of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, being the first woman poet to establish herself in the main English tradition, was upheld more completely by a comment made in the influential *Athenæum* when candidates were being sought to fill the post of Poet Laureate after the death of William Wordsworth in 1850:

In the reign of a youthful queen, if there be among her subjects one of her own sex whom the laurel will fit, its grant to a female would be at once an honourable testimonial to the individual, a fitting recognition of the remarkable place which the women of England have taken in the literature of the day, and a graceful compliment to the Sovereign herself. It happens to fall in well with this view of the case, that there is no living poet of either sex who can prefer a higher claim than Mrs. Elizabeth Barrett Browning.¹

Barrett Browning first projected the composition of *Aurora Leigh* (1856), her great epic story of the woman poet, as early as 1844. Her main intention was to go on and touch that real, everyday life of her age, and hold it with her two hands. She also expressed her intention to write a poem of a new class, and a novel poem consisting of nine books as *Aurora Leigh* truly brought to fruition all her talents – both personal and political, subjective as well as objective, in parts lyrical and in others, declamatory. In its exuberant and fierce commitment to the present, *Aurora Leigh* indeed succeeds in being a poem of a new class. She repudiates the habit of nostalgia, which tempts the Victorian poet with the glamour of the past, and from this new sense of the present she develops a crusadingly female poetics. The heroine of the work is a poet herself who writes the story of her life and literary success as one example of the general cause of women's emancipation and independence. The real everyday life of her age, which Barrett Browning confronts in *Aurora Leigh*, is mainly the real everyday life of women, in all its small domestic details, and it is from this specific bias that she derives a theory of women's writing as contemporary, combative and self-sufficient. Aurora's voice seems to echo that of the author's subtle autobiographical overtones:

Passioned to exalt
The artist's instinct in me at the cost
Of putting down the woman's, I forgot
No perfect artist is developed here
From any imperfect woman.²

¹*The Athenæum*, 1 June, 1850 issue, no. 1179, p. 585. *The Athenæum* restated the position in the 22 June, 1850 issue (no. 1182, p. 662), in note 13 in *The Brownings' Correspondence*, An Online Edition, Correspondence 2860. EBB to Mary Russell Mitford (14-15 June, 1850) as published in *The Brownings' Correspondence*, 16, 136-140. Source: <http://www.browningscorrespondence.com/correspondence/3134/>

²Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, Ninth Book, in *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, introd. Karen Hill (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1994), p. 535.

She realizes from her extensive experience of life, which has its inception in her mother's portrayal and its culmination in her affirmation of love for Romney, that in the process of defining herself as an artist who comprehends 'all the high necessities of Art',³ she has actually 'wronged' her 'own life'⁴ as a woman, which is her quintessential being. She feels 'vilely proud'⁵ and dauntlessly asserts her commitment and fortitude as a woman who refuses to be like the rest:

I would not be a woman like the rest,
A simple woman who believes in love
And owns the right of love because she
loves,
And, hearing she's beloved, is satisfied
With what contents God: I must analyse,
Confront, and question;⁶

The right to write was closely connected with every weird choice that women might wish to make. In an age characterized by the importance of the popular press as the place of ideological production and the spread of female literacy, it was of prime importance to warn women off questioning traditional sexual morality. Public writing and public speech, closely allied, were both real and symbolic acts of self-determination for women. Barrett Browning uses the phrase 'I write' four times in the first two stanzas of Book I, emphasizing the connection between the first-person narrative and the 'act' of women's speech, between the expression of women's feelings and thoughts and the legitimate professional exercise of that expression. *Aurora Leigh* enters, however, tentatively into debates on all forbidden subjects. In the first-person epic voice of a major poet, it breaks a very specific silence, almost appearing to be a gentleman's agreement between women authors and the arbiters of high culture in Victorian England that allowed women to write if only they would shut up about it.

Aurora Leigh comes between two very unequivocally political books, *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851) and *Poems before Congress* (1860), that deal much more tactlessly than *Aurora Leigh* with the insurgent *avant-garde* questions of 1848 and post-1848. Barrett Browning was profoundly enthusiastic about social and political concerns of the day and was predominantly a poet in pursuit of issues like slavery and abolitionism, the distress of the poor, the anxiety of a repressed national identity and the predicament of the social condition of women. *Aurora Leigh* is the most comprehensive exposition of the last theme. The overwhelming success of her earlier poem, 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship', decidedly motivated her to continue to write. It is concerned with a theme that was pivotal to a majority of the women novelists of the day – the prowess of women in determining their own companions without the consent of kith and kin as well as of society. *Aurora Leigh* deploys this as a cognate issue and puts forward its thesis on the question of marriage and its appropriateness for women with a profession, especially with writing as their vocation. Barrett Browning's foremost commiseration was reserved for women who created art.

Factory conditions and industrial labour, marriage and its discontents, motherhood (its pleasures as well as its pressures), passion (both sexual and religious), the 'fallen woman', militarism and the rise of nationalism, and colonial experience have also been the issues that can

³*Aurora Leigh*, Ninth Book, p. 535.

⁴*Aurora Leigh*, Ninth Book, p. 535.

⁵*Aurora Leigh*, Ninth Book, p. 534.

⁶*Aurora Leigh*, Ninth Book, p. 535.

be traced across the work of many nineteenth-century women poets. Sensitivity to oppression relates not just to the subordination of women. Right until the American Civil War, poems on slavery abound. One might almost say that slavery is pre-eminently the woman poet's theme. Anne Laetitia Barbauld, Hannah More, Helen Maria Williams, Laetitia Elizabeth Landon, Amelia Opie, Ann Hawkshaw and Elizabeth Barrett Browning – all have written on this emotive and urgent issue only to reach different conclusions.

In order to read Elizabeth Barrett Browning's abolitionist poems accurately, we must first sort out their publication histories, which have not much been taken into account by her critics. Scholars of Barrett Browning's work have been eager to connect a poem like 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' to the transatlantic abolitionist cause, recognizing that these poems first appeared in Boston in a gift-book, called the 'Liberty Bell', published annually (beginning in 1839) and sold at the National Slavery Bazaar.

The idea of slavery is one which creeps into Barrett Browning's descriptions of her father's rule, though she never accuses him directly of using the tactics of a slave-owner. 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' (1850) tells the story of a nameless female slave, who has seen her black lover killed by white masters, and who has herself been raped by them. To her horror, she subsequently bears a white child. The language of the whole poem is marked by the ideological division of black and white – black slaves and white masters, black mother and white child, black earth and white heaven. There is no moral authority that can be exempted from this stark relativism of a world seen as either black or white. Even the authority of God is implicated, for he comes with incriminatingly 'fine white angels'. In spite of all its heightened melodrama and carrying rhetoric, 'The Runaway Slave' is still a startlingly iconoclastic poem. This is because it breaks with two sacred myths of the English Victorian society – the myths of motherhood and fatherhood. The poem deals with European social problems which are tainted by a classist distancing. In this poem on slavery in America, the poet for once allows herself to take the viewpoint of the oppressed and to articulate a revolutionary anger:

My own, own child! I could not bear
 To look in his face, it was so white;
 I covered him up with a kerchief there;
 I covered his face in close and tight:
 And he moaned and struggled, as well
 might be,
 For the white child wanted his liberty –
 Ha, ha! He wanted the master-right.⁷

The new moral order is simply one of white and black, and even the prototypically innocent child cannot escape it. The imperialism of whiteness is a hereditary one, and the child's desire for liberty is a desire already corrupted by the assumption of 'master-right'. Since the system of master and slave is based on an original birthright, there is only one course of defiance for the female slave:

Why, in that single glance I had
 Of my child's face, . . . I tell you all,
 I saw a look that made me mad!
 The *master's* look, that used to fall
 On my soul like his lash ... or worse! –

⁷The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point', p. 229.

And so, to save it from my curse,
I twisted it round in my shawl.⁸

The easiness of this last verb neatly avoids any note of tragedy or sentimentality. The logic of killing the child comes as naturally as wrapping it in a shawl for protection. Simply by the fact of its colour, one may imagine that the white child inherits the ‘master’s look’. The only way to break this imperial lineage is quietly to kill him, and the poem accomplishes the black slave’s revolt with persuasive moral conviction.

However, this is a poem which protests not only the domination of the black races by the white, but also the domination that is carried out in the name of the ‘father’. The rape of the black slave is an outrage which is perfectly consistent with the myth of power that supports the rule of the white masters. The child inherits the father’s look as well as the master’s. The mystique of the father’s line and of the father’s name is the idea that the poem questions and defies. It shows fatherhood in complicity with racial power, and the sign of both lies in the authority of the ‘name’. That ‘name’ stands for mastery, and its repetition creates in the poem a linguistic line of descent which links fathers of all kinds in a league of power which naturally excludes the nameless female slave herself.

Hence, Barrett Browning’s poetry perspicaciously contribute to a feminist theory of art which argues that women’s language, precisely because it has been suppressed by patriarchal societies, re-enters discourse with a shattering revolutionary force speaking all that is repressed and forbidden in human experience. Certainly she saw herself as part of a submerged literary tradition of female writers. Physically she compared herself to Sappho; Madame de Staël was her romantic precursor, and George Sand her contemporary idol. No woman poet in English – after Emily Dickinson and before Sylvia Plath – rang such extreme changes on the ‘woman’s figure’, and women’s writing, both prose and poetry, is now a rich cultural resource. Barrett Browning, in her turn, became the ‘spiritual mother’ of Emily Dickinson and was ‘perpetually inspired by the “inscient vision” with which she solved the vexing “problem” of poetry by women’.⁹ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their book *The Mad woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, cite from an entry in Margaret Fuller’s journal in order to enunciate this problem:

For all the tides of life that flow within me, I am dumb and ineffectual, when it comes to casting my thought into a form. No old one suits me. If I could invent one, it seems to me the pleasure of creation would make it possible for me to write ... I love best to be woman; but womanhood is at present too straitly-bounded to give me scope. At hours, I live truly as a woman; at others, I should stifle; as, on the other hand, I should palsy, when I play the artist.¹⁰

The works of the Barrett Browning can thus be said to explore these diverse ‘tides of life’ that a woman artist experiences or, in other words, that she, belonging to a particular period of time in history which was so constraining as not to give her a literary place, might have experienced. She almost presumptuously, though often covertly, questioned the traditional ideals of femininity and gave expression to her creative anxiety through poetic and fictive representations of the self and

⁸*Ibid.*, ‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’, p. 230. Poet’s italics.

⁹Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 580.

¹⁰Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 71.

subjectivity. More than carving out a niche for herself, she has certainly been able to create a literary tradition of her own that is no less unique, enduring and self-sufficient in the 'literary marketplace' than that of the commonly accepted forms of canonical literature, so much as to stay in the mind of posterity and to thrive for ages to come.

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