

## SOME DIMENSIONS OF VIOLENCE IN ROBERT BROWNING'S *MY LAST DUCHESS*

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### ABSTRACT

*Robert Browning was a great Victorian poet. He established dramatic monologue as a form of poetry. He wrote some of the most memorial monologues. Of all these, My Last Duchess is a representative poem of his literary style, philosophy and creed and cult. Violence is the central theme in his monologues. Set in the Medieval Age, the poem depicts the psychopathic rage of the Duke that led to the murder of his beautiful and free minded Duchess. Browning touches some dimensions of violence making the Duke speak to an almost silent embassy disclosing his motives and the circumstances leading the Duchess' death. This paper attempts to analyze the inspirations, sources, causes, scope and implications of the force of violence in the development of dramatic action and building tension in the poem My Last Duchess.*

### Introduction:

Violence has been an indivisible part of human life. The history of humanity appears incomplete without the account of violence in it. There has been a growing consensus that violence is a natural phenomenon. Philosophers offer interesting account of binary theory to justify the existence of violence. Wars, carnages, assassinations, brutal killings, mental tortures are some of the common forms of violence. Robert Browning perfected the poetic form of dramatic monologue by producing some of the unparalleled monologues in his life time. A dramatic monologue is essentially an address by a speaker to an almost silent auditor. The speaker often shares his most private thoughts generally reminiscing his past forming the most painful, chilling and revealing experience effecting purgation in the readers.

**About *My Last Duchess*:** *My Last Duchess* is eulogized as a revolutionary poem. It appeared in *Dramatic Lyrics* in 1842, the year Browning rose to prominence after a series of failures. It is a shorter poem giving interpretation of human life from the close quarters. Critics argue that the poem is loosely based on the killing of Lucrezia di Cosimo de' Medici, the daughter of Tuscany by Alfonso II d'Este. A dramatic monologue is a discourse of a speaker, at a crisis juncture with a silent auditor. The Duke speaker is a widower who is at this moment entertaining a marital proposal from an emissary from the neighbouring state. While moving through his art gallery, he comes to the portrait of the deceased duchess. He reminisces her past and the monologue precipitates.

### Violence in other monologues:

In *The patriot* Browning employs the same technique of making the speaker reminisce his past. The Patriot speaker is being taken to the scaffold for certain of his misdeeds amidst people who once were ready to die for him. He is a reformer and a section of people was offended because of his reforms. A

year back he received a hero's welcome. All is changed today; he is a heretic. People hurled stones at him and his forehead is bleeding. Soon he will end up at the scaffold. This psychic trauma is the central theme of the poem.

"I go in the rain, and-, more than needs,  
A rope cuts both my wrists behind;  
And I think, by the feel, my forehead bleeds,  
For they fling, whoever has a mind.  
Stones at me for my year's misdeeds."

*Porphyria's Lover* is one of the most shocking dramatic monologues. Here is another murder in cold blood. It is in the tradition of *My Last Duchess*. In a typical romantic setting and atmosphere, a lover strangles his caressing beautiful beloved and plays with her corpse and even roots her organs out.

In *The Book and the Ring* tells us the story of a murder trial held in Rome in 1698. Count Guido Franceschini assassinates his young and beautiful wife because he suspects that she has illicit affair with a young cleric.

Even the rest of his dramatic monologues are replete with the force of violence. *Andrea delSarto*, for example, gives his discourse while lamenting over his deceitful behavior. He built a house out of the stolen money, because he did not paint for the king as per the promise. A painter of the stature of Michael Angelo is helplessly entertaining his unfaithful wife.

### **What is violence:**

Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary defines violence as being "violent behavior that is intended to hurt or kill" (Hornby:1704). In this context, Browning's poetry exhibits various dimensions in his poetry. His chief intent in projecting violent characters, scenes and their behavior is to lay bare human personality.

The present poem is about the domestic violence. Domestic violence "...refers to any abuse-including physical, emotional, sexual, or financial-between intimate partners, often living in the same household" (www.britannica.com). *My Last Duchess* is a story of an authoritarian Duke and his Marxist Duchess. The extreme contrast between the nature of the Duke and that of the Duchess is the main source that triggers tension in the poem. An intriguing Renaissance Duke marries a girl from pretty humble background. She fails to understand and adjust with the new setting. The Duke thinks that she must not mix freely with the ordinary people in the palace. The Duchess has a Marxist bent of mind and doesn't discriminate between the royal members and the servants. The violence between the male and female sex has its unique existence, significance. The perversion in their relationship has its beginning from the Garden of Eden where Eve reportedly causes Adam's downfall. Both in the myth and in reality, women often find themselves the victims of male arrogance, dominance, desire and even violence. There is no era in human history where women were not subjugated and exploited. They had no right to laugh freely, move freely and talk freely. The Duke in the poem *My Last Duchess* is a metaphor of this male tendency. It is the aspiration for freedom that takes its toll on the Duchess.

### **Feminine violence**

The crisis depicted in the poem is the crisis between the two sexes. This motif governs the poem from start to the end. Browning entangles sex and violence dexterously. The violence depicted in the poem is feminine in nature primarily. This feminine nature of violence needs to be analyzed because it brings into limelight the universal antagonism that lead to annihilation of female sex. Violence on women has received substantial attention worldwide in the recent years following some of the brutal incidents. The poem underscores the fact that even beauty is fatal. There has been a revival of interest in literature dealing with feminine violence.

**Contemporary relevance:**

The materialistic Duke commodifies the Duchess and manipulates art. This had a connection with the contemporary cultural life in England. The extreme consumerism depicted in the poem is symbolic the consumerism in the contemporary social and cultural life. It was time of great scientific discoveries and inventions that brought about the industrial revolution. The material affluence of the age also brought with it the rise in crime rate in the overcrowded cities. He was born and brought up at Camberwell, the London suburb. This exposure to the urban landscape stood in good stead with him while realistically depicting the violent situation in his monologues. He has first-hand knowledge of the crisis in human life. "There are villains enough, hypocrites enough, base fellows enough in Browning's poetry: he was not apt to overlook their existence or their ill doing; but unless he was ready to write off the universe as an idiot's creation he could not believe that the villains and hypocrites and base fellows were more than a temporary aberration of mankind." (Ward: 673)

**Honor Killing:**

The Duke kills the Duchess because he thinks that his family name is at stake because her loose behaviour. A sharp contrast characterizes behavior of the Duke and the Duchess. She is kind, free, broad-minded, ethical, sensitive, and aesthetic while the Duke is arrogant, cruel, jealous, over-ambitious, sensuous, narrow-minded, and materialistic. He cares more the family pride than natural liberty. He has an exaggerated notion of his worth. The word "nine hundred years gift" communicates as to how much he values his family fame. To him all else is secondary. He is pretty class-conscious individual. This gives rise to jealousy. She admires ordinary folk that throng the palace, accepts gifts from them. Upon this, the Duke mistakes that she pays relatively lesser attention to him. He kills her in order to restore the nine hundred years of family name.

"I know not how-as if she ranked  
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame  
This sort of trifling?"

**A Marxist View:**

The Duke has a false notion of his power and image. He thinks that the Duchess fails to treat him properly and respectfully. He is a man who seeks for balance and accuracy in art, personal life and behavior. The Duchess values her natural freedom of movement. The Duke values more his class than his individuality. For him the family tradition is more valuable.

There is a sharp contrast between the Duke and the Duchess in respect of the value they attach to freedom. The seed sown by the Romanticism in the last century has come to fruition with Browning. His protagonists always aspire for freedom. The Duke represents the evil shadow of the growing democratic spirit in the Victorian epoch. The Parliamentary Reform of 1832 deserves a mention in this context. Against this backdrop "democratic individualism is what gives distinction to Browning, though it was also the special gospel of his age" (Palmer: 125).

The opening lines of the poem can also be criticized on humanitarian ground. Ironically, the widower Duke admires the artistic quality of the portrait rather than the human being whom he made lifeless. It is simply a "piece of wonder" to him. The Duke looks upon the Duchess as an art object. He thinks she does not owe any respect to him. The word 'last', 'wall' and 'alive' evoke a sense of terror.

"That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive."

Her approach to the servants in the palace is equally praise-worthy. We can fairly infer from the text that people can easily approach her. She must be very cordial and helpful to common people therein:

“She thanked men,-good! But thanked/ Somehow-I know not how...” Her smile again assumes significance. The Duchess greets the people with her smile. To this the Duke has an objection for he thinks she should not smile to all who pass by her. His possessive nature is evident once again. He does not like her because she is courteous with the servants in the palace though they are quite below her rank. She smiled at all she met in the palace.

“Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,

Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without

Much the same smile?”

The word smile has been reinforced by the Duke for several times. He shocks his readers while using it for the last time. Ultimately, it is this smile that proves to be the immediate cause of her death. “This grew; I gave commands;/Then all smiles stopped together” are the most dramatic lines of this dramatic monologue. This kind of euphemism is actually a “...concise and abrupt way of stating things” (Curry: 01).

The violence in the poem erupted following the Duchess’ violation of the social code as well. She was not an ordinary individual. The psychology of code holds that the code conditions aristocratic members. Most people naturally abide by it. Thus a King must look like a King by means of his kingly behavior. In this respect, the Duchess violates social code which resents her husband. She lacks mannerisms. She fails to adapt to the royal manners and etiquettes in the new setting. Her physical gestures and movement resents her husband. Too much smiling, blushing, thanking ordinary people profusely, staring strangers makes the Duke angry.

Secondly, the Duke remarks that she becomes over intimate to gentlemen she approaches in the palace. The Duke is apprehensive of this trait of her nature. He attributes it to her vernacular manner. For example, the Duke reports that the blush on her cheek is not occasioned because of her husband’s presence alone; it may be due to the presence of monk friar Fra Pandolf, lower in her rank. This conveys the fact the Duke does not like her habit of being physically excessively close to the gentlemen. This ironical remark in the early part of the poem is pretty suggestive of his attitude to his Queen. Fra Pandolf adjusted her cloak in the portrait sessions and there is a blush on her face. Usually, this kind of blush means a sign of flirting. He thinks she is adulterous. “Sir t’was

Her husband’s presence only, called that spot

Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek”

### Technical Aspects of Violence in the Poem

Browning’s chief interest in his monologues is to unearth each motive that animates the human action. The entire discourse seeks to illuminate the instinct of the man in action. That energy, he holds is fundamentally psychic. He presents his protagonist abruptly in the discourse and gives argument after argument. The protagonist always has something to say urgently. The matters are always psychological. His religious priests, adamant wives, perfect painters, depressed artists, proud Dukes are shaped by means of their arguments. Through their discourse they convey the readers their way of looking at life which may not have any sound philosophical or utilitarian basis. That notion of life is shattered by someone around them. They feel aghast, manhandled and insulted. They feel their interest is at stake. Violence comes in to the fray at this very juncture. Most of his monologues “...projects with an almost quizzical violence a certain kind of personality, a certain temperament, a way of looking at life, even a moment of history realized in the self-revelation of a type” (Daiches: 1003). In this respect, the root cause of violence is the extreme difference between their way of looking at life. This inevitably leads to crisis and violence. Daiches foregrounds the “quizzical characteristic of the dramatic monologue.” The Duke is not composed before giving his discourse. He is captured at the most critical and spontaneous moment. “The real poetic interest of his monologue, however, as of so many of Browning’s more successful poems of this kind, lies in the violence and

vividness with which he renders the impression of a personality caught unawares”(Daiches: 1005). One of the prominent features of a typical dramatic monologue is “a single person, who is patently *not* the poet, utters the speech that makes up the whole of the poem, in a specific situation at a critical moment...” (Abram: 70). It is the critical juncture that renders the poem dramatic. Very often it comes in the form of an emotional crisis. Violence works as a catalyst in making the poem more dramatic and appealing. W. E. William’s definition is equally complementary in this regard. He defines dramatic monologues being “...dramatic pieces in the first person, about some vital experience in the life of an imaginary narrator” (Williams: 08). In essence, Browning’s choice of the medium of dramatic monologue employed in this poem is pretty suitable.

Browning’s real interest is to show us the character at the most critical juncture with a view to trace the motives that cause the violent behavior. Thus while justifying his behavior, good or bad, the speaker reveals his personality: likes, dislikes, priorities, attitudes, temperament, choices, habits etc. “People are his passion: men and women, revealed through their ambitions and failures and love and hatreds”(Williams: 08).

The silent auditor is another feature of a Browning monologue. Rather, he is kept silent throughout the one way discourse of the Duke also demonstrates Browning’s maturity as an artist and his technical perfection. The Duke does not let the messenger register his reaction even on one occasion. Setting contributes to building tension. The embassy is held captive in the private art gallery of the Duke. The Duke deprives him of his freedom of speech. He is taken for granted. There is no response or reaction from the messenger. He but listens to him silently. There is pressure being built on the embassy meaning he must present in favour of the Duke and convince his master when he is back to his state. In a way, the listener is not mute, but muted by force of violence.

The beginning of the poem in a kind of *media res* fashion evokes violence in the minds of the readers. The Duke reminisces his former Queen. He elaborates on the life-like quality of the portrait proudly. “There she stands/As if alive.” This line reinforces the violence pregnant in the poem. It is suggestive of the evil grip of the Duke that can turn life into lifelike (lifeless?) portrait.

The nonchalant nature of the perpetrator adds to the atmosphere of violence in the poem. The sense neutrality in his speech and exhilaration at the thought of second marriage plays an important role in the monologue. If we take a look at the Renaissance legal system, we can infer that the Duke is least bothered about the legal consequences arising out of the murder of the Duchess. His sole intension in talking at length persuasively to the emissary is to justify his devilish behavior with his former wife. He is all set to join into wedlock, possibly with another royal daughter. The poem in this way is confessional in nature. Rather it is a sort of damage controlling exercise on the part of the Duke. He tries to regain a sense of confidence, self-esteem to carry out the task at hand. In this respect, his seeming love for art is a counterbalancing act. Art is simply manipulated to better present him in the new context.

### Conclusions:

Throughout his poetic career Robert Browning demonstrated unparalleled commitment to his central mission of explicating human motives in his action at a tense moment. This is the very soul of a dramatic monologue. It renders the discourse dramatic dimension. Some of his poems are replete with violent episodes. His poetry is chiefly about the human relationship. The man-women relationship is also a dominant theme in his poetry. He draws a sharp contrast between their outlooks. Extreme behaviour, faithlessness, treachery, lust, consumerism, materialism, petty interest, envy etc. are the main channels through which the poet dexterously projects the spectrum of the force of violence. *My Last Duchess* stands out as a milestone in this respect. It shows various dimensions of violence and the instincts that cause violent behavior. In this dramatic monologue Browning shows readers the private life of a Renaissance Duke.

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