



## Optimism In The Poetry Of Robert Browning

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***Abstract : The present paper depicts the optimism of Robert Browning's poetry. The Victorian era was an age of conflict mainly between science and religion. The conflict and social unrest cause pessimism in most of the poetry of Victorian era. But Robert Browning was different from his contemporaries. He believed that human being is not perfect. But one should always try to reach perfection.***

The Victorian age is one of the most remarkable periods in the history of England. It was an era of material affluence, political consciousness. Democratic reforms, social unrest, educational expansion and religious uncertainty. Despite of shortcomings, no one can deny that in many ways it was a glorious period of English literature and the progress made in the field of prose, poetry and fiction is commendable. This was a peaceful age and people were not afraid of any war. On the contrary people felt safe and secure in their homes. This was an age of industrial progress but this created social unrest and economic distress among the masses. This age created a gap between rich and poor.

Despite of scientific progress Victorians were moralists at heart and religion was the anchor of their lives. There was a conflict between moralists and scientists. Victorians laid emphasis on order, decorum and decency. The Middle class rose in this era. Walter E Houghton reflects that. "Once the middle class attained political as well as financial eminence, their social influence became decisive, the Victorian frame of mind is largely composed of their characteristic modes of thought and feeling."

The Victorian age has some strict moral rules like repressed sexuality, strict morality, an expression of English imperialism, the conflict between science and religion, created a kind of social unrest in this period. Robert Browning (7th May 1812-12th December 1889) was a famous Victorian poet. He is noted for his dramatic monologues. In 1846, he married Elizabeth Barrett and went to Italy.

Browning embraced the uncertainty of his time as a facet of human nature and psychology. His poetry depicts the psychology of his characters. The main aspect of Victorian England was its 'prudish' attitude on sex. The Victorians think that happy families could be created and thus creates a moral society. But Browning does not believe in this philosophy. He in his poems *Porphyria's Lover* show the ugly side of such assumptions. The Victorians believe that a woman should prepare a nice home for the success of a man and Robert Browning shows the vicious side of it in his poems like *My last Duchess* and *The Laboratory*. The industrial revolution opened man's ability to exploit the nature for his own benefit. Darwin's theory of evolution led many doubts in human mind. Browning in his poems questions the value of life without faith and also celebrates the possibilities of a man less tied to God. Poems like *Rabbi Ben Ezra* confronts these questions directly.

Among the great Victorian poets, Robert Browning stands out as poet with some sort of vision of life. Tennyson presents no distinct vision of life which may be legitimately called his own. There is much criticism of life in the poetry of Arnold than any definite view of life. No doubt Arnold's poetry is essentially philosophical. But no distinct philosophy emerges out of it. It only inspires us to ponder over the manifold problems of life. Browning does instil hope in the goodness of human life through his optimistic vision of life.

Browning's attitude towards life is well-known. He knows that life in earth is full of pain and misery. From his study of his past history of mankind and of the contemporary life, he came to realize that the life is not worth



living. One of his basic beliefs is that man is not judged by what he had achieved but by his attempts or by what he fails. We are not to be measured by our success but by our efforts. In Rabbi Ben Ezra he writes:

What I aspired to be, And was not, comforts me  
A brute I might have been, but would not sink  
The scale.

As for Browning's 'robust optimism'.an attitude, which also grew on him with age and success, it serves mainly to remind the literary historian that Browning, unlike Tennyson, made no real attempt to come to terms with his age. He brushed aside its doubts and problems, to contemplate intriguing Renaissance figures in Italy. His optimism was not Victorian, no other Victorian literary man was either a prophet or a warrior or a doubter and none of these are optimistic. In his poem, 'The Last Ride Together' he writes:

Earth being so good, would heaven seem best:

Now Heaven and she are beyond this ride.

In 'Porphyria's Lover', the lover kills his mistress in good faith, realizing that she was at the height of perfection and that her love was likely to get tainted if she lives anymore. Browning's philosophy is based on the positive aspects of human experience. But this attitude may be termed as idealistic or less.

Her living one wish would be heard. And thus, we sit together now,  
And all night long we have not stirred,  
And yet God has not said a word.

Browning was a happy man in his personal life. He had enjoyed the company of his poetess wife, Elizabeth Barrett. Their life together was considered one of the great love stories of English literature. Thus, it was because of his optimism. But this is not true. The death of his wife in 1861 inspired him to write the poem, 'Prospice'. In this poem we found the hero challenging death fearlessly. He is ready to face any difficulty that come his way in old age. In his poem, 'Prospice' he writes:

I was ever a fighter, so-one fight more,  
The best and the last! I would hate that death bandaged my  
eyes and forbore, And bade me creep past... O' thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,  
And with God be the rest.

It is useless to deny that Browning's attitude to life is highly objectionable. The hero of 'Prospice' boldly asserts that he will fight against the terrors of imminent death. The speaker of 'Rabbi Ben Ezra' gives us his exhortation about the rough edges of our life.

Then, welcome each, rebuff That turns the earth's smoothness rough  
Each string that bids, nor sit nor stand but go! Be our joys three parts pain!  
Strive and hold the cheap the strain; Learn, nor account the pang;  
dare, never grudge the throe!

Browning was aware of the miseries and pains of life. He knows that the life in this world is full of problems and miseries. But does not lose hope and feel that they are not meant to frustrate life. He accepts them as challenges or tests for one's patience or for one's courage and endurance. Thus, we can say that Browning's poetry was based on realities of human life. He does not shut his eyes upon the miseries of life but he would like to take them for granted. His love poems are, perhaps, his greatest achievement. They have a calm authenticity of tone. His first concern was with the human soul. He was particularly interested in abnormal people and was able to project himself into their minds and to lay bare their feelings and motives. His characters are not objective because most of them are mouthpiece of his philosophy. He has a relish for a grotesque, which can be seen in his poem 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower':

Which, while I forded-good saints, how I feared

To set my foot upon a dead man's cheek, ...It may have been a water-rat I speared,  
But, ugh! it sounded like a baby's shriek.

Browning wrote too freely and often too carelessly and perversely and much of his work will pass into



oblivion. His fame now rests on those four volumes, published between 1842 and 1864, which his love lyrics and dramatic monologues.

Browning's poetry gives hope to people against the pessimistic mood created by the growing materialism of Victorian age. His poetry enables a person to accept pleasure and pain alike Hudson says, 'As a moralist and religious teacher, Robert Browning held a very distinct place among the writers of the Victorian age. He preached God and immortality as the central truths of his philosophy of life. In his poetry he propounds the idea that are related to God, man and the External universe. His poetry is full of optimism.' In Pauline, the lover says; I saw God everywhere -I felt His presence

Browning also believes in the immortality of soul. He thinks that progressive nature of man is a distinct nature of man. According to him man is a mixture of strength and weakness and virtue and vice together. In The Last Ride Together, the lover says;

What hand and brain went ever paired  
What heart alike conceived and dared?  
What act proved all its thought  
had been  
What will but felt the fleshy screen

Browning says that man cannot attain absolute perfection in this world. According to him life evolves and always move forward. Browning suggests people that though men feel misery as his enemy but it is for their betterment. Because misery brings the best in human being. The poet says that a man who fails in this world does not mean that a man cannot reach heaven. William J Long has remarked "Browning's message is the triumph of the individual will over obstacles".

Browning never denied the existence of evil in this world. He says that the world is a mixture of good and evil. The aim of the man should be to find the beauty of this world. In Guardian Angel, the poet says:

O world as God has made it! All is beauty;  
And knowing this, is love, and love is duty.

According to Browning if the human soul progresses, then what is the use of pessimism. Though there is pain, evil and misery in this world yet they can not subdue the soul. The misery only makes the people strong and helps them to survive in the world.

Browning believes that a true lover finally wins his love. It catches hold of the souls of two lovers and brings them together to a point of union. In his poem, Life in A Lover, the lover tells his beloved that she can never escape him, as long as he loves her.

While I am I, and you are you,  
So long as the world contains us both,  
Me the loving and you the loth

While the one eludes, must the other pursue  
In Evelyn Hope, a forty-eight-year-old loves a sixteen-year-old girl. He confesses he had been loving this girl since ages. His soul has pursued her soul. For she is dead but he has a hope of winning her in his future life. He says:

The time will come-at last it will.  
The reason of his optimism is his religious belief; ...for God above  
Is great to grant, as mighty to make,  
And creates the love to reward the love.

According to Browning man and woman are attracted towards each other because their soul is drawn towards each other. If the love is intense but fails in one life, it will bear the fruit in next life. Browning talks about the series of incarnation to pursue the aim.

In the conclusion we can say that Browning takes a positive aspect of life. He does not believe in weeping over the sordid realities of life. He encourages us to them in our stride and try to overcome them with courage. It is sheer foolishness to waste our energies on the negative aspects of life.

Thus, we see that Browning's poetry can be a great source of inspiration for the people of this troubled world today. Browning was a spiritual fighter. He did not get disillusioned at discovering suffering, misery and illness in this world. At the last we can say that Browning's optimism gives a better man.



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