

A Sense of Loss and Nostalgic Feeling in Select Poems of Robert Browning

Ranjit Mandal

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jain Vishva Bharti Institute, Ladnun, Rajasthan

Email-ranjit92.mandal@gmail.com

Mob-9851413614

Abstract: Nostalgia is a state which almost all people experience. People are daunted by many psychological forces such as loss, embarrassment, humiliation, annoying reminiscences, and the very fact of death. Therefore, they keep on searching 'Utopia', a perfect tomorrow in a sense to compensate the past, soothe the disturbing memories and polish the scurrilous. The term 'nostalgia' has been derived from a Homeric term 'nostos' which means homesickness to show Odysseus' homesickness in his epic 'Odyssey' when he was freed from war. Johannes Hofer coined this term in medical context to refer to patients' anxiety and mental agony or disorder. The 'Online Merriam-Webster Dictionary' defines nostalgia as, "pleasure and sadness that is caused by remembering something from the past and wishing that you could experience it again." Therefore, 'nostalgia' is not only sadness or sickness, but also taking interest of retaining the past. This paper attempts at analyzing how Browning reflects upon the pang of loss and reveals nostalgic feelings in his poetry.

Keywords: nostalgia, embarrassment, humiliation, utopia

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Robert Browning, a renowned poet of Victorian period of English literature, is much acclaimed for the depiction of empirical view of Victorian society. He is the prophet of struggling manhood and a religious teacher whose words enlighten the depressed, miserable souls. In this perspective, he, through his dramatic monologues, goes beyond Tennysonian melancholia and Arnoldian pessimism. "Dramatic monologue is a kind of poem in which a single fictional or historical character other than the poet speaks to a silent 'audience' of one and more persons"(Baldick,

2008, 97). Such poems enable Browning to unlock his speaker's personality, motives, obsession and psychology which in a sense show Browning's optimistic philosophy of life. On the surface we find the poet (speaker) is happy with his circumstances but deeply he tries to cover his sense of loss and suffers from nostalgia.

The poem *The Last Ride Together* suggests a monologue of a rejected lover for his undying love to his beloved. Apparently, the speaker coolly shows his optimistic attitude and hope and considers himself as the luckiest but in reality he merely attempts to console himself smartly by saying-

“Fail I alone, in words and deeds?

Why, all men strive and who succeeds?” (lines, 45-46)

Even, the repetition of ‘Since,’ in the first stanza of the poem, bears the speaker's constant attempts to get back to the happiness he was bereft of.

“Since now at length my fate I know,

Since nothing all my love avails,

Since all, my life seem'd meant for, fails,” (lines, 2-4)

The speaker's direct claiming “Only a memory of the same”(line, 9) and subsequently his comparison of his own fate with that of ‘A soldier’, a ‘poet’ ‘great sculptor’, and ‘man of music’ somehow draw his awareness of his creeping sense of loss. His blissful wish of death “...the world may end tonight” and that of eternal ride “The instant made eternity,-/And heaven just prove that I and she/ Ride, ride together, forever ride?” (lines, 108-110) refer to “...desire is not a relation to an object but a relation to a lack...”(J. Lacan, w. w. Norton and company, 1998) which symbolically refers to the speaker's great sense of belongingness.

The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church reveals the deep rooted nostalgic feeling and lack of belief of an anonymous Bishop who forcefully orders his sons (devotees) to construct an unusual tomb for him after his demise. The beginning line of this poem "Vanity, saith the preacher, Vanity!" quoted by the Bishop from 'The Book of Ecclesiastes' indicates that everything under the sun is futile. In this perspective he has been just opposite to that of the common assumption. His entering into the spiritual world is not due to his spiritual desire but due to the loss of a fair woman.

"She, men would have to be your mother once,

Old Gandolf envied me, so fair she was!" (lines, 4-5)

The dying Bishop wants to take revenge upon his predecessor Gandolf even after his demise. So he wants to hire 'master' (line 79) (tomb designer) who would cement his resting place with 'fig leaves' (line 40), 'Lapis Lasuli' (line 42), 'basalt for my slab' (line 53) and 'bronze' (line 55) to make Gandolf jealous. His burning desire is to keep alive the materialistic envy, after leaving this mortal body, actually, refers to Victorian hypocrisy and loss of faith.

"Old Gandolf, at me, from his onion-stone,

As still he envied me, so fair she was!" (lines, 117-118)

In his famous poem *My Last Duchess*, Browning shows the story of a hubristic duke of Ferrara, a city in northern Italy (Kennedy:1995, 595) who has killed his duchess because he is displeased with her outgoing personality. The poem begins with the duke's portraying of his dead passive wife's painting painted by Fra Pandolf's hands (Browning, 200, line-3), hanging on the wall of his gallery before the envoy. But Browning here illustrates a dysfunctional relationship between the duke and the duchess which exposes the duke's past retaining memories regarding the duchess in her life time.

"That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive. (Browning, 2000, lines 1-2)

Moreover, the duke thinks himself as a supreme being who wants to possess control over everything, even on his own duchess. But From psychological point of view, he is basically a baby who wants attention from everyone for his insecurity. Hence the duchess's extravert behavior and constant smiles for one and all, threaten the insecure duke. As the duke utters in the poem it

“Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart-how shall I say?-too soon made
glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, twas all one! My favour at her breast,” (lines, 20-25)

The self centric, tyrannical and materialistic duke wants to control the story of the duchess and her image but his emotions go beyond his control and expose his crime: “Then all smiles stopped together (line, 47).” The repetition of the word ‘Smile’ by the duke somehow refers to the exceeding beauty of the duchess and ‘As if’ (“As if alive”, line, 48) refers to the painful scouring of life and death which defrays a worm of consciousness.

In *Patriot into Traitor* Browning pens down a monologue of a nostalgic king who focuses his rise and fall in the contemporary politics. His heroic welcoming and subsequently ousting by the same people, expose the political changes in the third world countries in which patriots are branded as traitors in coups.

"It was roses, roses, all the way

...the Church-spires flamed, such flags they had,

A year ago on this very day!" (lines, 1-5)

In *Porphyria's Lover* Browning depicts loss and feeling of nostalgia through possessiveness where the speaker kills his own beloved to keep the experience of past ecstasy and blissfulness forever and delineates everything from his own point of view.

"Three times her little throat around,

And strangled her. No pain felt she;

I am quite sure she felt no pain." (lines, 40-42)

After the above survey, it is quite clear to us that "life...is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing ('Macbeth,' V, V, lines, 24-28). Browning believes life to be brittle and full of imperfection but in this very nothingness or imperfection lies hope which can bloom the flower of joy, soothe the disturbing memories and polish the scurrilous. He also believes that life on this earth is worth living because both the life and the earth are the expressions of divine love which indoctrinates us how to overcome the pangs of loss and nostalgia and be full of cheer and hope. We have to agree with Shelley when he says-

"...O wind,

If winter comes, can spring be far behind?" (lines, 69-70)

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