Performing Genders: A Study of Atypical Masculinity in Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover"

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Abstract

The moment a child is born, the baby is called either a 'girl' or a 'boy' on the basis of reproductive organs and structures. The discourse which we understand and follow, differentiates males, females and other genders on the basis of anatomical differences and thus strangely enough children are all born not as humans but as 'males' and 'females.' Since the literature of a time reflects the social realities of the period to which it belongs, choosing Judith Butler's 'performative theory' of gender, Robert Browning's 19th century poem 'Porphyria's Lover' is studied to have a general understanding of the ideas of masculinity as prevalent during the Victorian age.

Keywords: Gender performativity; Masculinity; Victorian gender constructions.

Introduction

"Porphyria's Lover" is a poem by Robert Browning which was first published as 'Porphyria' in the January 1836 issue of the *Monthly Repository*. The poem pictures a man, who is visited by his lover named 'Porphyria'. The man realizes her love for him the very first time and burning with passion, he strangles her with her hair. The man opens her eyes, unfolds the hair from her neck and spends the rest of the night cuddling with her corpse.

Robert Browning, born on 7th May, 1812 and lived up to 12th December 1889, was an English poet and playwright whose mastery of the dramatic monologue made him one of the foremost Victorian poets. His poems are

known for their irony, characterization, challenging vocabulary, dark humor, social commentary, historical settings and syntax. "A chief support of Browning's popularity is that he is for many, an initiator into deeper mysteries of passion, a means of escaping from the moral poverty of their own lives and of feeling the rhythm and compulsion of the general striving" (Santayana 19). Almost all of Browning's heroes are blinded by the passion of love. His poem 'Porphyria's Lover' is chosen as a subject of study to understand the idea of masculinity in correspondence with the social settings of the Victorian era.

In general discourse, the term 'sex' stands for the identification of a person as male or female, and gender stands for the state of being. That is, we have presumed patterns of behavior that are considered typical to men and women. These patterns are inscribed on the unconscious of human beings right from childhood and are treated as normal. For example, 'Men don't cry' is a common comment told by elders to young boys where boys are indirectly taught that men should be strong and should not be emotionally expressive, which also suggests that women are just the opposite. They become the 'ideal adults' who believe in the strength of man and in the fragility of woman. Another example is the 'fairytales' or 'folktales' for kids where legendary heroes save helpless heroines. These acts establish the 'vigor' and 'power' of men that is different from that of the 'weakness' and 'submissiveness' of women.

The book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) by Judith Butler, American philosopher and gender theorist, is considered as one of the most influential works on gender studies. Looking at the concept of gender, Butler asks: "Is there a gender which persons are said to have, or is it an essential attribute that a person is said to be" (7). This questions the authenticity with which we conceive the notions of both 'sex' and 'gender'. The central concept of Butler's theory is the term 'Performativity of gender', by which she claims that gender is the stylized repetition of acts, an imitation or miming of the dominant conventions of gender. On the basis of what Butler explains, gender is to be understood as a 'social construction', or rather, a 'misrepresentation'. This attributes an essence to the existence of a man and woman which is termed as 'masculinity' and 'femininity' respectively.

Butler also contradicts the 'body politics' we follow, making forced gender roles free from the 'burden of Sex'! Quoting "One is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one" from *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir 330), Butler explains: "One becomes a woman but always under a cultural compulsion to become one and clearly the compulsion does not come from sex. There

is nothing in her account that guarantees that the 'one' who becomes a woman is necessarily female" (8). The same can be told in case of men too. Thus, the body has nothing to do with behavioural expectations and can be understood as a passive recipient of cultural laws, which actually denies the intended connection between sex and gender. Thus, if gender is independent of sex, masculinity can be attributed to a female body and femininity to a male body without any queerness.

Now the question is, what is masculinity? How far is it nurtured? An in-quest into the so called 'maleness' reveals that the very term is accepted and followed in its most narrow sense. Tim Edwards, in his book *'Cultures of Masculinity'* (2006) opines that the typical representations of masculinity actually place the very concept itself in both 'physical' and 'cultural' crises. The cultural representation of men as the breadwinner, head of families and center of power, along with the physical representation with well built, muscular, oiled and gleaming body established itself as the essentialities for an 'ideal masculinity'. Therefore, the classic model for men, always remained to be one-dimensional, emotionally limiting and centered on models of performance.

Primarily defined in terms of sex role theory, family, work and education became the key institutions through which boys became men, developing strong values of competitiveness, careerism and success. Along with these advancements, there also developed a repression of sensitivities through the withdrawal of physical affection and increasing stigmatization of expressions of vulnerability, such as crying. This trapped the men in a position which undermined both their physical health and psychological happiness. These increased repressions turned men to ways of sports, career or sexual conquests with an unusual energy to 'perform' their masculinity. Perhaps, the fact that the performance of physical violence like hitting, punching, pulling, tearing, smashing, stamping, slamming, etc. was done by men than women in the recorded history of crimes, attributed 'violence' as a quintessential characteristic of masculinity (Edwards 42)

Thus, for men, aggression, belligerence and violence became ways to represent power. Along with that, hardness, suffering in silence, insensitivity to pain, and an unflinching willingness to inflict it when deemed necessary were considered key aspects of successful masculinity. Being thrusted upon men so vigorously, these very characteristics shaped masculinity the more 'performed', 'socially privileged' and 'greater pretender' of gender than femininity.

The rigidity with which we follow the gender binary system as reflected in

the popular culture could be traced back to nineteenth century England. The period is named 'The Victorian Era' after Queen Victoria. She ruled England from 20 June 1837 until her death, on 22 January 1901. Butler observes: "It becomes impossible to separate out Gender from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (3). 'Victorian Morality' actually drew a clear-cut line between the two genders thereby framing 'separate spheres' for men and women. "During the Victorian period men and women's roles became more sharply defined than at any time in history. . . As the 19th century progressed men increasingly commuted to their place of work – the factory, shop or office. Wives, daughters and sisters were left at home all day to oversee the domestic duties" (Hughes).

Thus, it was accepted without question that men were the breadwinner of the family while women shall take care of the domestic household.

> Victorian theorists such as 'Herbert Spencer' (English philosopher, sociologist, and liberal political theorist of the Victorian era) and 'Patrick Geddes' (Scottish biologist, philanthropist), constructed a stereotypical model of the gender binaries that pointed out men as the 'active agents' who expended energy while women were considered 'sedentary', 'storing' and 'Conserving' energy. Therefore, it was defined with a dichotomy that what is feminine is 'anabolic' in nature which nurtured, and what is masculine is 'katabolic', which released energy. (Lee)

In spite of these assigned roles in family structure, strict patterns were drawn for them in their sexuality also. Along with courage, resolution, tenacity and financial independence, the question of sexual behaviour also became an essential factor in defining successful manliness in the Victorian era. Victorians marked a kind of interconnectivity between 'sex' and 'gender roles' which naturally forced the weaker sex to remain cold and frigid. At the same time, the catabolic men were justified for their sexual acts. Difference in 'Gender roles' were rationalized on the basis of physicality, and identities got defined in terms of 'male and female body' or rather in terms of a natural or biological evolution.

This switching to a new perception actually indicates the birth of a strong 'patriarchal culture' or rather a 'hegemonic masculinity' the concept which normalized the projection of its sexual anxieties on its subordinates, none other than women. But in this play, unfortunately both the sexes were unknowingly trapping themselves in strictly set patterns of physical and emotional expressions which they could not ever escape. These referenc-

es, if studied under the ideas of Butler, reveal to us that "the cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of identities cannot exist – that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not follow from either sex or gender" (17). Hence, it is also to be understood that it was neither culturally possible for the Victorians to think of gender, sex and desire as independent entities nor they could escape their notions of gender roles as that would make their existence culturally meaningless and unintelligible.

Victorian literature reflected the social and cultural dilemma the people were going through. Victorian poets talked or created the fictive versions of the then existing social realities. Browning's poems clearly reveal the extremities of the two genders in working out their passions. Also "The men and women of his poems are representative of their eras and reflect the milieu-political, artistic and religious-of the time in which they live" (Raymond 117). Hence his poems could serve the purpose of history in its true sense, a quality for which his poems are famous. Thus, by taking into account a poem of nineteenth century, the paper aims to carry out a quest in understanding masculinity, gender roles and their normative acceptances related to a period of history.

A Performing Lover

'Porphyria's Lover' is one of Browning's most acknowledged poems. The central theme of the poem is nothing but murder. The poem under discussion and other poems like *'Andrea Del Sarto'* (1855), *'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister'* (1842) etc. are examples of 'Dramatic Monologues'. Dramatic monologue, also known as a 'persona poem', is a type of poetry written in the form of a speech of an individual character – a poem in which an imagined speaker; not the poet, addresses a silent listener; usually not the reader. A literary form that was rather new to English literature, was developed by Browning which requires the reader to complete the dramatic scene from within, by means of inference and imagination. Structured as thus, Browning used this form to speak about desire, passion, obsession and madness –what constituted his heroes. He pictured his leading men extremely possessive and obsessive in love. In reflection of the 19th century Victorian milieu, Browning spoke on gender and sexuality of man and woman. In fact, more of men than women.

 In 'Porphyria's Lover', the title takes the stand of Porphyria the woman, and refers to her lover, the man. The first understanding of the title creates an impression that the man who does not even have a name, lives in the

shade of Porphyria or rather it is Porphyria who gives meaning to his existence, but on reading the poem, we infer that if the man is 'nameless', the woman is 'identity less'. He is 'verbally silent', but she has 'no voice'. He is 'passive in actions', but she 'lacks the freedom to act'. Observing how masculinity and its Victorian implications shape the character of the hero, we see a male with a perverted possessiveness. The man, widely read by critics as paranoid or insane could be referred as the very reflection of Victorian power dynamics based on gender.

The poem begins with the description of a troublesome atmosphere, amidst of which we see a man in his cottage. It is raining and the wind is personified as having woken up, tearing the top of elm trees out of resentment and vexing the lake nearby. This nature of the storm is suggestive of the disturbed mind of the man.

> The sullen wind was soon awake,
>
> It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
>
> And did its worst to vex the lake:
>
> I listened with heart fit to break. (2-5)

His heart is troubled in the absence of Porphyria, his lover. Suddenly Porphyria ushers herself in to the cottage. According to the speaker, "she shut the cold out and the storm" (7). With her presence he feels relaxed and experiences warmth out of the chaos around. Once inside, Porphyria removes her cloak, shawl and gloves. She is ready to spend the night with him and expresses her feelings for him.

> She put my arm about her waist,
>
> And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
>
> And all her yellow hair displaced,
>
> And, stooping, made my cheek lie there (16-19)

The man remains rather cold or irresponsive to the demands of Porphyria. He, neither pays any attention nor is moved by her seductive acts. When she declares her love for him in words, he sees it as mere murmuring. He realizes that she loves him. But he responds that she cannot break up with her upper-class ties and therefore, is too weak to follow her heart. For him, "pride, and vainer ties dissever" (24) her love. At the same time, he thinks of the struggle she underwent to come and meet him despite the storm. He is delighted and declares "Porphyria worshipped me" (33). He wants to possess her at that very moment with all her fairness and beauty. He

knows that he cannot own her and thus decides to kill her – an instinct driven out of extreme passion!

> That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
>
> Perfectly pure and good: I found
>
> A thing to do, and all her hair
>
> In one long yellow string I wound
>
> Three times her little throat around (36-40)

The man after committing the murder unties her hair and kisses the dead body of Porphyria. In his words, "her cheek once more blushed bright beneath my burning kiss:" (47-48). He then makes her head rest on his shoulder and finds glee in seeing that her utmost desire to be with him is now fulfilled. "So glad it has its utmost will/ That all it scorned at once is fled/ And I, its love, am gained instead! (53-55). The man thinks that by killing Porphyria he is doing a favour for her as he is helping in getting rid of everything she hates and assumes that her greatest desire is to possess him! "Porphyria's love: she guessed not how/ Her darling one wish would be heard" (56-57). He sits with her still body the whole night and believes that he did the right thing because even "God has not said a word!" (60)

Browning has employed a play in picturing the man and woman in 'Porphyria's Lover'. He presents his male lead to the readers as an exception as compared to the typical Victorian man. Contrary to the accepted pattern of living, in the poem, it is the man who stays at the cottage while the woman is out during night. As per Victorian morals, no woman is allowed to go out or walk alone at night. Therefore, in the very beginning of the poem itself, readers are faced with a question of a role reversal – something that was unthinkable in the Victorian era. Also, the man or 'the masculinity' as seen in the poem, is passive or somewhat submissive in the beginning: "I listened with heart fit to break" (5). The man is understood to possess a tender heart which might break any time. This shows how far he is from the qualities of courage and strength of Victorian masculinity.

Also, the poet has carefully chosen words in describing the body postures and positions of both the man and woman. Porphyria kneeled first, thereby causing the man and the atmosphere to blaze. This is suggestive of the normal 'female submissiveness' and the probable pride-filled mental state of the Victorian male stereotype, whose superiority and dominance is accepted by a female. Browning but immediately confirms that then she 'rose'. Thus, the man continues to sit while Porphyria stands: "And kneeled and made the cheerless grate/ Blaze up, and all the cottage

warm/Which done, she rose…" (8-10). This could be a signal of a feminine power over the masculine. The ascent refers to the rise of the female class or rather it equally stands for the descent of masculinity. Coming to sexuality and its representations in the poem, again readers are met with a contradiction. The man remains irresponsive to Porphyria's sensual acts. He is cold and devoid of desire.

The verbal silence of the man at Porphyria's highly sensuous acts is quite shocking and unacceptable to the Victorians because it was normal for men to have sexual arousals and intense passions because the katabolic men need to spend their energy. The man tries to keep himself away from the socially dictated role of masculinity, in the beginning of the poem by being submissive in body posture, action and sexuality. That is, Porphyria's lover at the least was trying to disestablish the masculine notions.

This is where Browning's hero leaves a mark. The poem takes a diversion when the hero commits a rethinking. His ego strikes him the very moment, and his change of mind is suggestive of a failed attempt to tear down the practiced gender roles of the Victorian period. He was not able to stand that momentary submissiveness before Porphyria and couldn't accept the truth that Porphyria has declared her love towards him while it was his right to propose love to her first. This is because, he was so trapped in the social setting through continued practices, which re-established his masculine role of dominance. Being insecure in her social superiority, the insane decision to kill Porphyria is nothing but the ferocious expulsion of this momentary suppressed pride and will.

This portrayal of an alienated Victorian man, if analysed in the context of Butler's gender performativity, adds to our understanding of gender stereotypes. The man, who ended up in killing his lover in the ecstasy of passion, suggests the impossibility of the Victorian men to escape out of a constructed male self: "Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding self" (Butler 140).

Thus, it is to be understood that the image of an 'ideal man', framed by the Victorian morality, with the typical qualities of power, superiority and dominance constituted his gendered self which he was never able to escape. The man cannot escape this male consciousness that was once imbibed, practiced and still persisted in his gestures, movements and ac-

tions. Being part of a society with strict, conditioned norms and standards on gender identities, it became his necessity to show his masculine power and maintain the dignity. According to Butler, gender is nothing but "re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation" (140). The ritualization of gender practices made the Victorian men, slaves to those roles. Thus, it is obvious that any act, that attempts to take them away from that role, would pressurize them mentally and result in intense emotions, anger and aggression.

In 'Porphyria's Lover' this aggression came out as a desire to make Porphyria lifeless. The comment made by the man after strangling her deserves much attention: "And strangled her. No pain felt she/ I am quite sure she felt no pain" (41-42). The man declares openly that she didn't feel any pain while being strangled. Here, he tries to project Porphyria as an emotionless, senseless and cold being; in fact, not only Porphyria, but all the Victorian women. Also, the man expresses affection on Porphyria's lifeless body by kissing her. This clearly points the fact that, what the man actually wanted was not to kill her, but make her senseless like an object, so that he can gain complete control over her. Here, the true self of the man is revealed to be in need of Porphyria.

He also wanted to possess her just like she wanted to be with him, except that he wanted her senseless. Thus, the constructed self finds that killing her is the best way to fully express its will and he supplicates to the same. The man ends up in showcasing himself as a zealot, but one with no regrets. The gruesome act of killing Porphyria and the display of affection that followed were all part of the ways in which, the constructed self, expressed itself! Thus, 'Porphyria's Lover', who is widely read as an insane psychopath is understood to be more of a 'victim' of the social practices of the time, than a 'passionate lover'.

For a society with tight and strict norms on behavioural patterns, it is quite impossible to impart a change quickly, especially when the whole social group imitates what has been already there. Butler remarks that the "gender performances are effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame" (140). It is to be understood that the practiced gender roles, limited and restrained the idea of 'gender' itself into the categories of 'male' and 'female'. Also, the very concept of sexuality got stuck within this binary framework, for which, Victorians claimed new notions, differently for both genders.

The man becomes a victim of repeated practices of gender. He cannot es-

cape out of the socially constructed identity of his maleness. The question here is, how did this gender performativity, or rather, false identities survive through the ages? "Gender reality created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character" (Butler 141). It is clear that, the so called 'performances' and the 'identities' that follow, are both constructed and inseparable to each other. In fact, the repeated performances create a false illusion of identities and the acceptance of these identities as normal and natural, in turn, demands them to be practiced and performed.

Conclusion

The Victorian society was a social group founded on strict and rigid social practices. In the realm of gender, a clear separation between 'man' and 'woman' was established and specific gender roles were assigned to both. By practice, these roles eventually established a dominant masculine and subordinate feminine culture. In the light of Butler's gender performativity, gender is identified to be independent of an identity or essence of its own. Instead, masculinity and femininity are regarded as ontological concepts only because they are performative in the very acts through which they survive.

The male character in the poem has widely been acknowledged by critics, as an insane psychopath who burned with extreme passion to possess his love. Browning's hero actually has his individuality in conflict – a conflict between the 'constructed' and the 'true' self. The constructed self, demanded the man to be dominant over his partner, because he has been practicing the same, individually and socially and expected the woman to submit to it. But Porphyria's active and lively interactions troubled him and he got caught in a struggle of losing his own identity. This increased his fear of failure and made him commit a terrible murder! The man committed the gruesome murder not because of his inherent masculine violence, but due to the very pressure the society exerted over him to follow the ways of the constructed self and his helplessness to come out of this glass ceiling. Browning has clearly depicted this mental pressure on Victorian masculinity to maintain manhood and dignity which crushed his heroes' sense of identity and made him a victim of his circumstances!

The fact that continued practices affect the shaping of false identities also hints at a possible solution. That is, if we cannot stop practicing, we can change what we practice! The very performative character of gender itself

can be used to tackle the problem of gender differentiation –practice, continue and follow patterns of behaviour which are not restricted by body, sexuality, gender and identities – that is, focus on the possibilities of the performances than its limitations! The question carries the answer in itself: 'If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently?'

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