

Porphyria's Lover: From Text to Our Context

Ms Abeen Bilal Shayiq

Student, MA English (Literature), Jamia Milia Islamia New Delhi (India)

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 10 January 2019

Keywords

patriarchy, men's psyche, possessive psychotic nature, psychological suppression, interpellation, relationships

*Corresponding Author

Email: [abeenbilals\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:abeenbilals[at]gmail.com)

ABSTRACT

The following paper brings forth a number of aspects about patriarchy as presented in literature and in our present society objectifies women, how intricately psychological oppression is deep rooted and literature and popular media portray these realities. The paper takes up some Victorian texts and some examples from popular media as well as real life examples to bring forth hoe men's psyche functions in all these cases. It allows the reader to understand the power struggles in relationships, methods of control and the hegemonic aspects that does not allow women to take any action regarding their own lives. The paper does not aim to only blame just one sex of society, but to put their actions under the scanner once so that it is understood that these things happen in present times as well. When insecurities and jealousy develops in a relationship or when men believe that their ego has been compromised, then a lot of times women have to suffer at the hands of their partners. We need to understand that what happens in texts like 'Porphyria's Lover' or what is depicted through movies and other media is prevalent in our contemporary daily context as well.

1. Introduction

Isolated! Silenced! Misunderstood! These are invariably the catchwords of patriarchal society in relation to women. There is no denying the fact that women over the epochs of history have manifested many paradoxes, yet proved to be defiant and unpredictable. She's been fragile and frivolous, yet she has displayed fortitude and forbearance. She's been buoyant, yet her existence has been subjugated and suppressed. There are significant social and textual indicators that suggest men need women as a trophy for their ego. Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" exemplifies how little space women get in their relationships. It's not about love, but about possession, not just loyalty but complete submission.

The paper essentially aims to convey how patriarchy blended with men's psyche has created a microcosmic world for women; how they are idealized at one level and violated at another level. We also observe some similarities ranging from Victorian age to present times. The paper concentrates on violence, but not just physical, emotional and psychological as well. Through the prism of this text, we look at instances in today's world of men behaving not so differently. The methods of control and possession may be different, but there are Porphyria's lovers prevalent in almost every era and society. This paper allows us to consider how literature and popular media reflects the actions of society and in turn influences the society as well.

Literature, since time immemorial, has been able to signal the realities of society. Caesar emphasized literature's role in allowing its readers to grasp the meaning of human conflict(Manal). Literature, perhaps, provides us with an opportunity to delve into the minds and imagination of others. Literature and other arts have been seen as reflections of the fundamental reality of a culture, variously called the "culture mentality", "Weltanschauung", "spiritual principle" or "soul" of

the different stages in the development of a culture. These conceptions are derived largely from Hegel and other European historical philosophers of the early nineteenth century as well as from the sociologists, Comte and Spencer.

There is much in Victorian literature that mirrors how society has been biased against women. She has been controlled and her desires curbed. Writers like Jane Austen show how marriage was the only viable and lucrative option for most women; Charlotte Bronte depicts through the character of Bertha Mason how women were considered hysterical and needed to be tamed. Lacking the power of education and the right to fend for themselves, they were often confined to the domesticity of the household. Chastity and humility were expected as virtues from women. Browning's Porphyria reflects ineluctable ardor and perseverance even though the poetic persona of the lover speaking exhibits moronic and morbid intensity, eventually resulting in the murder of Porphyria. Like any other cogent device of popular culture, literature has been used as a puissant and potent tool to present the morals, values and attitudes of the prevalent times. It can be argued that Victorian society created a façade of protecting women, in order to control and subdue them.

While discussing the Foucauldian idea of body and sexuality, Sara Millssays, "Nicola Gavey surveyed a wide range of heterosexual women and asked them whether they had ever had unwanted sex with their partners (Gavey,1993). While most of them admitted that they had had sex with their partners when they had not wanted to, they did not classify this as rape" (90). This allows Gavey to interrogate how the complexity of notions of consent in a heterosexual relationship is often not considered. There is generally, a stereotypical construction of unequal power and it is not questioned. In the nineteenth century, phrases like "male authority" and

“masculine power” echoed how the decision making power was in male hands.

Although canonical female characters of Victorian literature like Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Eyre and Maggie Tulliver, show women having some agency, we are still able to see the struggle they had to go through, be it in society, in their relationships or for their education. Men thus have had a dominant position in real society, as well as in fiction. Many works make us conversant with their dominance and the obsessive nature of their relationships in Victorian literature and with parallels within contemporary society. Be it some notable men in Browning's poetry or some telling representations of men today, both display the fixated nature of treating women as their 'prized possession'.

“Porphyria” is one of the earliest dramatic monologues of Robert Browning which first appeared in the *Monthly Repository* in 1836. However, in 1863 it was retitled as “Porphyria's Lover”. The monomaniac characterization of the speaker is indicative of the degree to which the Victorian period was restrained and prohibitive. Porphyria became the center of her lover's thoughts. He would notice even minute details about her. His over-thinking led to strange thoughts coming in his mind. On a cold wet night, sitting alone without any warmth in his surroundings, all he can think about is Porphyria's fidelity. The effete speaker elicits ideas about his psychotic melancholy and diffidence. The restraining existentialism of the Victorian era also creeps into the psyche of the speaker who murders Porphyria with her own hair in order to freeze in time the moment where he acknowledges her devotion to him. With his emphasis and repetition of the word “mine” all he wants is to make sure that she loves him forever.

That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
Perfectly pure and good: I found
A thing to do, and all her hair
In one yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around
And strangled her
(Browning, “Porphyria's Lover” 91)

These lines capture how calmly he takes away her life. Similarly, the world that we live in today also finds ways to gradually strangle women, their voices, dreams and desires. Just like the lover, the perpetrators are deluded that what they are doing is right and for women's own betterment. This paper uses Browning's figures as an entry point to explore how even in today's world lovers/husbands can turn into psychotic obsessive partners.

In “Porphyria's Lover” it all begins from his insecurity; her beauty seems to him a threat to their relationship. He wonders how someone as beautiful as her could possibly be in love with him. This leads to him not trusting her. He does not acknowledge her caring and loving nature. All this arouses jealousy in him. She has been out in the rain and he can't help but think if she has been with someone else. In the end he becomes obsessed- so much so, that in order to make sure that she is only his, he summons the ability to kill his own

beloved- to have her silenced permanently because according to him, then no one else can have her and she too would not leave him. Although Porphyria has surrendered to him physically, he is still unsure of her fidelity. He does not only want to control her sexuality, but has gone to another level and taken control of her life. He believes it is his right to have her all to himself, to decide the fate of her life. In Victorian society, women did not have much agency. The lover, however, permanently makes sure that she would not be capable of making any further choices.

Browning depicts the darker side of his heroes. Their love becomes an obsession; jealousy leads to insecurity and all this turns into madness and shows unstable behavior. Browning plumbs men's psyche and has a flair for depicting it in his dramatic monologues. His best-known canonical male partners are psychotic and sociopathic. But first we need to understand the meaning of these terms, as they are sometimes mistakenly used synonymously. The *Merriam-Webster* dictionary defines these terms as follows:

Psychotic is having or relating to a very serious mental illness that makes you act strangely or believe in things that are not true.

A sociopath is a person who behaves in a dangerous or violent way towards other people and does not feel guilty about such behavior.

We see that Porphyria's lover clearly has these characteristics. The same could be seen in the Duke from “My Last Duchess” (1842), Browning's other well-known dark patriarchal figure who in order to prove his power orders for the Duchess to be killed off. For him, it is his pride which is at stake. Both of them prove to be dangerous dark men, not ashamed of their acts and on top of that they are seen to be justifying what they have done, not because they feel guilty but just to prove their dominance. Victorian society had submissive women who were silenced by patriarchy into accepting their fate of dependence. These two Browning men however, take hold of their partner's lives and take silencing to another level i.e. by having them dead.

This obsessive and possessive nature of men in relationships can be seen even today. Similar kinds of insecurity and jealousy are prevalent in contemporary times as well. Even more so because women now-a-days have some power and are able to interact with the outside world, unlike the Victorian era when women of certain classes were confined to the domestic arena and mostly their only interaction with people was during social gatherings and balls. Under the façade of protecting the women, men became over-possessive. Back then and now, when a man is forward and flirtatious, he's seen as charming and is called a ‘stud’ while in the same society, a woman who works late or has much interaction with men is seen as a ‘whore’ or other derogatory terms are used for her reflecting normative patriarchal ideology.

The ideals of society have traditionally been mostly formulated and dominated by men. Women are posited as

intellectually inferior, allowing men to create hegemonic norms that women are supposed to follow. This hegemony creates an imbalance of power and control. Women thus are considered the weaker sex and interpellated into believing that whatever rules they are supposed to follow are for their own good. J.S. Mill in his 1869 essay, "The Subjection of Women" says that, "Men do not want solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiments... not a forced slave, but a willing one, not a slave merely, but a favorite" (57). Girls are thus taught to please men, to submit to their will not reluctantly, but with complete dedication and devotion. It is ironic that the more women climb up the social ladder, the more men feel insecure. J.S. Mill also suggested that, "the male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with an equal" (59). There is a buildup of anger, frustration and hurt ego which culminates often in beating up the partner, rape or some other act of physical/emotional violence.

In the Victorian era, women often did not have any right to decide anything for themselves, let alone have a say in the larger society. Since women in the middle and higher social classes were mostly prevented from even making their own living, marriage was seen as one of the most prosperous and lucrative occupations, making the ambition of many Victorian women to be married and get settled. This curbed a range of desires outside the limits of this social trajectory. In her essay, "Gender Roles in Nineteenth Century" Kathryn Hughes says that, "Being forward in the company of men suggested a worrying sexual appetite." This is seen in the attitude of the Duke towards his Duchess. Be it the 'half-flush' (Browning, "My Last Duchess" 86) she had or the smiles she passed around to everyone, it all hurt the Duke's ego. He wanted special treatment and attention from his wife. But she was, perhaps, too democratic and naïve to understand it and the Duke was too proud to let her know what he wanted from her. He thus "gave commands; then all smiles stopped together." (Browning, "My Last Duchess" 87).

This is valid even today. Men most often want their partner to obey their wishes and meet their needs. The woman's priority should be only to keep them happy and satisfied. In Indian society, it is said that a woman's *tann* (body), *mann* (heart) and *dhan* (wealth) should be controlled by her husband. This means that a woman's body, heart and soul and material wealth should be her husband's property. Is it because men cannot control their own urges, so they want control over a woman's body? Is it about possession; to call her 'his own' as if the women are their personal property? If these are the thoughts going on in their mind, then there is a certain need to reform their ideology and perspective. But it is not so easy. This obsessive nature that men show is described in its medical aspect as morbid jealousy. It is a disorder in which one partner doubts another's fidelity, mostly based on no reason at all. They have this delusional jealousy which drives them to a point where they can behave dangerously. They just bring up petty issues like talking to someone else or being late from work as reasons for their doubt. In his research, O.Somasundaram, while citing Tarrier, writes, "that morbid jealousy is a multidimensional emotional complex relating to unfounded suspicion of sexual and emotional rivals and a fear

of losing the partner and the relationship manifested as reforms in the cognitive, effective and behavioral domain" (3).

Many a times it happens that women have no idea how to escape the web of insecurity created by their partners. It usually starts when men act a little jealous and protective. Women believe their statements about how they do not want to lose them. They in order to save and continue the relationship, they let them take control of their lives. Now-a-days, there are so many ways by which they can keep an eye on their partner's every move - checking their text messages and emails, listening to their phone conversations, having other people spy on them and so much more. A blogger by the pseudonym of 'Avalanche Of The Soul' shares her own experiences of having a morbidly jealous husband. He would not allow her to interact with any male person without an inquisition. She says that, "He'd take me to his friends, and afterwards I'd be grilled endlessly about what they said to me, how they looked at me, what they meant when they said this or that. Eventually, he stopped speaking to a lot of his pals because he imagined that they had made a move on me." These kinds of people isolate themselves as well as their partners from everyone. Their fear and insecurity shuts their rationality. And eventually the women, who want to save their relationship, give in and lead a life controlled and monitored by their partners. It is difficult to live with people who doubt your every move and monitor your every action, but for many women, more difficult than this is breaking away from these relationships.

Popular culture or media in India too has iconic reconfigurations of this phenomenon. Popular culture and media in the form of novels and movies often captures certain social realities. Society in turn manifests instances of being influenced by what is portrayed on screen or in words. One of the more popular contemporary Bollywood actors, Shahrukh Khan, has done many roles in which he portrays the character of an obsessive lover. In *Darr* (1993), he played the character of a young obsessed lover (Rahul Mehra) who was insanely in love with Kiran Avasthi (Juhi Chawla). While Rahul keeps on stalking Kiran, she, unaware of Rahul's insane passion, gets married to the loving and caring Sunil Malhotra (Sunny Deol). Rahul is the kind of lover who doesn't fear death, who can go to any limits, even killing people coming in his way. This movie had such an impact that even after more than two decades Rahul's character has become achieved negative iconicity, especially his way of naming Kiran with a stutter at the letter 'K' (K kkkiran).

This famous actor has also played the role of a rich spoiled businessman in another movie, namely *Anjaam* (1994). It shows how Vijay (Shahrukh Khan) who falls hopelessly head over heels in love with an air hostess, Shivani Chopra (Madhuri Dixit), is unable to handle rejection. His love turns into obsession. He thinks that if he can't have Shivani, no one else can have her. A trait typically associated with vicious male psychology is shown - even when a girl says no, and does not reciprocate their interest/love, they do not step back. Rejection hurts their ego. Vijay goes to such an extent that even when she is married, he still continues to woo her and just wants to win her. These kinds of lovers are violent and dangerous, both

to themselves, and to others. At first, Vijay tries to commit suicide, later on; he eventually kills his beloved's husband.

The way Porphyria's lover and the Duke act culminate in violence and death. While the Duke wants the public eye to see the relation between him and his Duchess (for example, by having her portrait painted and controlling the discursive contexts of its unveiling), Porphyria's lover wants a private life for them, away from the public gaze. The Duke wants to show off his wife, while the lover wants to keep Porphyria away from people's eyes. The Duke makes sure all her smiles are stopped, and Porphyria's lover behaves pathologically, when he thinks that she must now, in death, be happy and smiling. Both want their partners to act according to their will and choice. Agency is snatched away from the women. Browning, through both men, presents an eerie atmosphere and queer psychotic behavior but in both instances he draws on historical

textual sources and figures to present these dark psychological possibilities that lurk beneath the veneer of normative patriarchal gender socialisation.

One hears of so many cases of acid attacks on women, of rape, or women being stalked, getting sinister blank calls, anonymous letters and messages. All this has become so common in today's world that society turns a blind eye towards these issues. Even when men put women on a pedestal publicly, there are instances of them eventually treating them in unspeakable ways that revive age-old repressive paradigms. This is not to say that all men do this, but these modes of behavior and thinking may not be limited to a few exceptions or even a just a significant minority. The danger is when even milder variants of this model of behavior become the norm and not an aberration. How alert are we to the manifestations of Porphyria's lover all around us?

Works Cited

1. *Anjaam*. Dir. Rahul Rawail. Perf. Madhuri Dixit, Shahrukh Khan, Johnny Lever, Himani Shivpuri, Deepak Tijori. 1994. DVD
2. *Avalanche of the Soul*. 23 Nov. 2013. Web. 29 Dec. 2015. <<https://avalancheofthesoul.wordpress.com/2013/11/23/morbid-jealousy-in-abusive-relationships/>>.
3. Browning, Robert. "My Last Duchess". *Victorian Poets*. Ed. SuroopaMukherjee. New Delhi: Worldview Critical Edition, 2014. 86-87. Print.
4. Browning, Robert. "Porphyria's Lover". *Victorian Poets*. Ed. SuroopaMukherjee. New Delhi: Worldview Critical Edition, 2014. 90-91. Print.
5. *Darr*. Dir. Yash Chopra Perf. Shahrukh Khan, Sunny Deol, Juhi Chawla, AnupamKher and DilipTahil. 1993. DVD.
6. Hughes, Kathryn. "Gender Roles in Nineteenth Century" *Discovering Literature: Romantics andVictorian*. British Library. n.d. Web. 29 Dec. 2015. <<http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/gender-roles-in-the-19th-century>>.
7. Ismail, Manal. 'Literature is the Mirror of Society.' *Gulfnews.com*. 24 Feb. 2008. Web. 29 Dec. 2015. <<http://gulfnews.com/literature-is-the-mirror-of-society-1.86134>>.
8. Mills, Sara. *Michel Foucault*. Routledge Critical Thinkers. London and New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2005.
9. Mill, J.S. "The Subjection of Women." *Nineteenth Century Thought: An Introduction*. Ed. Anand Prakash. New Delhi: Worldview Background Studies, 2014. Print.
10. "Psychotic." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 31 Dec. 2015. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/psychotic>>.
11. "Sociopath." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 31 Dec. 2015. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sociopath>>.
12. Somasundaram, O. "Facts of Morbid Jealousy: With an Anecdote from a Historical Tamil Romance". *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*. Jul-Sept. 2010. Web. 29 Dec. 2015. <<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2990838/>>.