Robert Browning’s Treatment of Love in Earlier Poems:
A Critical Assessment.

Sanjay Shrivastava
Associate Professor
IILM College of Management Studies, Greater Noida
Mail ID: drsanjay.research@gmail.com

Love is undoubtedly the spirit of human life, the finer breaths of pious souls, the throbbing of passionate hearts and the exuberant force of inspiration to a creative action. Robert Browning knew this quintessence of life. He was an ardent lover. The nucleus of his poetry, the enthusiastic love, has been reflected into almost all his poetic creations. The inertia of love was fully bloomed into a lovely rose of optimism, with its two sub-ordinate leaves, his wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning and his child Robert Weidman Barrett Browning. Perhaps, it was Browning’s passionate and forceful love for Elizabeth Barrett that has endowed him great success almost in all the fields, he attempted;

“There is nothing sickly or dreamy in him: he has a clear eye, a vigorous grasp, and courage to utter what he sees and handles.” (George Eliot 1974).

This attitude gave him the confidence to establish an optimistic attitude to life, to the world, and to almost all existing things, which was the extract of his uncircumscribed love. All these contribute a lot in making him the chief exponent of what has been called ‘Victorian Optimism.’ This gave Browning recognition in poetic sphere and ranked him as a great poet and esteemed highly as Tennyson, thus he became the voice and spirit of his age, the Victorian era.

Browning’s poetry reminds us the truth that we are reading rather studying a writer of lofty thought, who possesses a lofty soul, charges his characters with power and endows the marvelous verbal effect which is next only to Shakespeare, an this specific writer in the treatment of love stands seconds to none. The specific facets of love, reactions to the torments and the ecstasy of romantic love have been sung with greater.

Intensity by Shakespeare, Patmore, Sidney, Burns, Hardy, Meredith, Yeats and some twentieth century poets like- Eliot, De la Mare, Frost and Woolfe. But, so far matter, depth and touchy-feelings are concerned about the love between a man and a woman, the everlasting knot of love with timeless union, Browning has no competitor and stands alone rather, becomes the beacon-light for his successors. The profound love with intense feeling of severe passion, a life that includes lives of love in it, and all its indefinable, link with the infinite reality that is God, one’s complete and intimate understanding for other, the quality of self-abnegation and ennobling, an unspeakable faith and a concrete philosophy, and the perfect way of life that takes two persons to
the level of their unlimited and impossible best. In such kind and quality of love, Browning stands as a perfect lyricist. If we suppose that by the modern times, such pure and perfect kind of love shall have become extinct, only a little number of souls will, after going through Browning’s poems, realize with dilated eyes, as we do now about Greek nature worship that something beyond from value and irreplaceable has been gone away from the human pictures.

Such sweet and melodious outpouring of over brimming love was the result of that unprecedented and unrivalled, history-making relationship that Browning shared with Elizabeth Barrett. Actually, she was the permanent shower of inspiration for Browning’s spiritual and intellectual strength. She was the real and only thundering force behind the full-ripe and mature genius of Browning, Cohen writes-

“Browning did not write great poetry until he had attained emotional maturity, and this he lacked till the years of his marriage. (Cohen 1964)

Browning’s unshakeable belief in optimism and faith in heaven and in the immortality of the soul are very much clear from this poem which, in the accordance of it, may easily be regarded as a song to the glory of failure, thus, this poem becomes the most representative poem which comes out with the thought of optimistic love.

In Dramatic Lyrics and Dramatic Romances,- there are a number of poems, which grow less from Browning’s mental or intellectual study that from his keen observation and his own personal experience of life. One of the most characteristics and the old element in Browning’s poetic creation, his interest in the intense and forceful passion of love, is now given a new emphasis and direction for several of the poems were written, as he courted Miss Elizabeth Barrett. Till now the shadow of Plutonium owed much to doubt, to Shelley, But it was after all a conception, that was vital to the whole of his thought concerning human relationship and that remained from a thing of lasting importance on his mind as well as heart. Especially for Browning in his union with his beloved wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning was to live and feel that very experience to which Shelley had restlessly and strongly aspired but all was in vain. This meeting and marital-unions of Browning with Elizabeth Barrett was the peak of pleasure for Browning in comparison of other ecstasies of his life.

This was the supreme experience of Browning’s whole life feelings supreme experience did not make him a poet rather; Elizabeth Barrett made him a love poet. Through the love that she endowed to him, the man of supreme love experience became the supreme love poet. Her reward was- By the Fireside, which could be treated as a poem which treasures Browning’s almost all romantic feelings, which are kept with the final lock of memory in the heart. This poem could be called the greatest love poem in the English language, or the other language that has dealt with the topic love. In this poem we may name the glimpse of almost all the real feelings of love, of Browning’s heart that can be regarded as the real and supreme feelings of Browning’s love. Browning watches her beloved Elizabeth as she “musing by fire-light” and thus, he said to himself.
My own, confirm me! If I tread
This path back, it is now in pride
This think how little I dreamed it led
To an ago so blest that, by its side,
Youth seems the waste instead?

(By the Fireside L121-25)

For art’s sake only, poet seems transporting the perfect meeting of lover’s spirit into a forest scene. Otherwise, this poem, in reality just have taken place in London’s dreary Wimpole street. Browning feels the pleasure as much as he could, for that rarest communion of hearts;

……..like the heart you are,
And filled my empty heart at a word.
If two lives join, there is oft a scar,
They are one and one, with a shadowy third;
One near one is too far.

(By the Fireside 226-30)

Again-
A moment after and hands unseen
Were hanging the right around us fast;
But we knew that a bar was broken between
Life and life: we were mixed at last
In spite of the mortal screen.

(By the Fireside 231-35)

In the poem By the Fireside, we observe two souls of love, the lover and the beloved completely in each other with full contentment. But commonly such a marvelous communion of spirits is not to be known to the most of men, or by chance, if they know it, they know it fleetingly or rarely. It is not specific with the love characters of Browning, rather the most of us have lived our life alone and in such a case, between among us there flows an unquenchable, salty and estranging sea. In the poem, Two in the Campagna, - as common, the lovers never meet with each other, in spite of the speaker’s strange desire for such a meeting.

I yearn upward, touch you close,
Then stand away. I kiss your cheek,
Catch your soul’s warmth, - I pluck the rose then
And love it more than tongue can speak-

Then the good minute goes. (Two in the Campagna l46-50)

“To him love is the supreme experience and function of the soul, testing its temper and revealing its probable fate. In such poems as Cristina, Evelyn Hope, The Last Ride Together, My Star, By the Fireside and many more, he has
presented love in its varied phases and has celebrated its manifold meanings not only on earth but in the infinite range of worlds through which he believes that the soul is destined to go in search after its own perfection.” (Moody & Lovett 1994)

In other writers of the love-poems, the theme of unrequited love seems probably producing more effusion of sorrowful moments of the bearer- lover’s life, of sickly sentiment than any other subject. Bit Browning, the poet of love-lyrics, does not do so, rather he provides the treatment to the subject in a way that it keeps within manifold dimensions of love, that is at once novel and so admirable. We do not observe any verbal-talk among his lover’s of “blighted hearts,” we do not see any whining or weeping. There is not any confession of contempt for the woman who has had the ill taste to refuse some of the concerned lovers, but on the contrary a noble and mainly resignation, a picture of profound and still grateful sorrow which was not very much in itself of reproach nor do we observe any of the lover’s despair. In the poem Cristina Cristina’s lover has very much of her love but at last “changed eyes” from her true love.

She should never have looked at me
If she meant I should not love her! (Cristina L 1-2)

And their love seems to begin, find its middle and reaches at the end without speaking of a word from the lover to beloved. Thus the love is full of “Deeper blisses”.

Else it loses what it loved for,
And eternally must lose it;
Better ends may be in prospect,
Deeper blisses (if you choose it),
But this life’s end and this love-bliss
Have been lost here. Doubt you whether
This she felt as, looking at me,
Mine and her souls rushed together? (Cristina 41-48)

But at last no scorn can undo the spiritualistic transformation which her glance brought:

.......the secret’s mine now!
She has lost me, I have gained her;
Her soul’s mine: and thus, grown perfect,
I shall pass my life’s remainder. (Cristina 57-60)

Edward Berdoe remarks-

“The passion of love, through Mr. Browning’s works, is treated as the most sacred thing in the human soul. We are here for the chance of loving and of being loved; nothing on the earth is dearer than this; to trifle with love is, in Browning’s eyes, the sin against that Divine Emanation which sanctifies the heart of man. The man or woman who dissipates the capacity for love is the destroyer of this or her
own soul; the flirt and the coquette are the losers. - The forsaken one has saved his own soul and gained the other’s as well. (Berdoe 1989)

In many of Browning’s poems the element of hope finds its full play. In many cases, the lovers are rejected by their beloved but as a result they do not loose their heart, rather they act much forcefully. In dejection, they do not surrender themselves completely to frustration on the contrary by such failure they store food for their future success. Browning’s all the lovers act on the principal “all men strive and who succeed” if they go in the shelter of such sorrowful emotion, that remains for a short while and the lovers are soon replenished with fresh aspirations and hopes. The truly tragic love-story for Browning was not the story of love rejected in the real sense, but of love flagging, fading or crusted-out. The lover in the Last Ride Together, the final rejection by the beloved, at last refuses to accept his failure in love and remains still full of new hopes and for the fulfillment of these hopes:

What is we still ride on, we two
With life forever old yet new,
Changed not in kind but in degree,
The instant made eternity,-
And heaven just prove that I and she
Ride, ride together, forever ride? (The Last Ride Together L 105-110)

In the poem Evelyn Hope, we come across the same kind of love in which the love is unknown but challenges love’s eternity. This poem enshrines the highest expression of Browning’s faith and philosophy in the power of love. According to Browning’s belief in optimism, he believed in the immortality of soul and the benevolence of God’s greatness.

According to Browning’s firm belief, no heart’s wish remains unfulfilled in heaven. He shows his unshakeable faith in the existence of Almighty, according to his strong belief; each deep rooted desire is fulfilled in the Greater world. The Great God ho showers his love on all and rewards, a benevolent father of the universe, needs that the heart’s- wish of a sincere and devoted persons should always be fulfilled.

In Evelyn Hope, the choice of theme is very much heart touching. The lover is about a middle aged person, who, in the heart of his hearts loves a girl who has just stepped in her youth and hardly has crossed the sixteen springs of her life, Evelyn hope, the girl who his loved dies in flourishing age. The lover sits by the side of the dead body. The lover thus, meditates upon the blessed days that have ended with her, with her sad demise. Like a true and typical heroic creation of the optimistic-poet, the love begins to meditate upon the realistic and philosophical facets of human life and death. The lover is fully convinced of the immortality of the human soul as also of the immortality of the certain and perfect power of love. The poem exhibits that the death of the teen aged beloved is not at all worth creasing the lover from loving her in such glorious moment of death. Thus, the lover decides for the continuous pursuance of this maiden
through ages with increasing passion. Browning puts forth the thought that the true and sincere love never goes in vain or unrewarded. If the love of the lovers is really sincere and true, their unsucces\(s\) do not matter at all, they will get their reward in the other world of heaven. This is the quint essence of faith of the lover which keeps up his spirit of union:

I claim you still, for my own love’s sake!
Delayed it may be for more lives yet,
Through world I shall traverse, not a few:
Much is to learn much to forget
Ere the time becomes for taking you. (Evelyn Hope L 28-32)

The entire poem is characterized with the deepest of emotions, pathos and tenderness. The young lady lying dead in the arms of her miserable lover naturally presents a strong situation too deep to shed tears:

Beautiful Evelyn Hope is dead!
Sit and watch by her side an hour.
That is her book-shelf, this her bed;
She plucked that piece of geranium flower,
Beginning to die too, in the glass;
(Evelyn Hope L 1-5)

The lover heavy-heartedly remembers the lady and ponders on her fortune and her beautiful face. He also remembers that those, whom God loves, die young.

“His love will not be lost, for his gains of the ages and the climes will not satisfy him, without his Evelyn Hope. He can wait. He will be more worthy of her in the worlds to come. Modern science has taught us that no atom of matter can ever be lost to the world, no infinitesimal measure of energy but is conserved, and the poet holds that there shall never be one lost good. The eternal atoms, the vibrations that cease not through the eternal years, shall not mock at the evanescence of human love. (Berdoe 1989).

In the last portion of the poem the tenderest and most lovely scene appears when, the lover puts the petals of flower in the palm of Evelyn and says.

I loved you, Evelyn, all the while.
My heart seemed full as it could hold?
There was place and to spare for the frank
Young smile,
And the red young mouth, and the hair’s young gold.
So hush I will give you this leaf to keep:
See, I shut it inside the sweet cold hand!
There, that is our secret: go to sleep!
You will wake, and remember, and understand. (Evelyn Hope L 49-56)
In the poem A Woman’s Last Word the subject is the wife, who has been severely exhausted after a long argumentation with her husband and thus, she is ready to make a complete surrender of her body and soul, keeping all his moral values aside. In order to save and protect their intimacy from this hostile world-

Be a god and hold me
With a charm!
Be a man and fold me
With thine arm!
Teach me, only teach, love!
As I ought
I will speak thy speech, love,
Think thy thought. (A Woman’s Last Word L 21-28)

Love, for Browning was the peak of activities, of which human beings are capable, thus, he devoted his most intense and perfect consideration to it. Unlike the romantic poets, he created his world of love - lyrics like a practiced lover and he did not stick to a specific subjects rather he touched and treated almost all the colors of love emotion. Browning’s subject was neither happy nor unhappy love but love as an experience, a love that includes both the ends of ideal, spiritual and physical love and seers a line of horizon, whose reality was bound up with its permanence; his greatest love poetry is quite reflective of idealism in love as well as the physical charm of love.

The poem Two in the Campagna, regarded as a poem of love, in which Browning develops and pours out his precious thought as ever, as the new fact of love in the poem, the lover pours out his emotion aloud to a silent listener, his beloved. The lover expresses his heart lying and intense love feelings for his sweet heart. But, at the same time, the lover points out to her the inadequacy of their love and its falling short to quench his all the desires full and completely. The lover has an aspiration which goes beyond all the boundaries of earthly love and almost all the speaker’s love for the woman. Bit, helplessly the lover loves his beloved undoubtedly because it has yet not remained the matter of his hand or will, just it is not in his control to love him or not:

How say you? let us, O my dove,
Let us be unashamed of soul,
As earth lies bare to heaven above!
How is it under our control
To love or not to love? (Two in the Campagna L 31-35)

The sphere of Browning’s love poems have left no stone unturned. As Wordsworth has recorded each flittering of flower’s petal, doing the same, Browning thinks finds-out, and gives an unmatched analysis of psychology of love, recording the each pulse of love emotion.
Browning is not only the poet of normal psychology, rather, at some places, he expands his limit and goes beyond, discovers some specific but still hidden aspects of abnormality in lover’s love-emotion unapproachable by the poetic-eyes of other writers. Apart from Browning’s bulk of love-poems, his analysis of abnormal psychology of love, he is first and foremost. His poetical philosophy of eccentricity in love is not a sudden and improper theory rather it has some profound basis and steps which provide the significance of treatment of eccentricity in love.

The poem Porphyria’s Lover is the most representative in Browning’s group of poems based on eccentric or abnormal love. Porphyria’s Lover, can be considered as a study in abnormal psychology. A host of critics and commentators are of the opinion that the lover is almost in some. It is arrested even by Robert Langbaum, the lover, the teller of the whole-story is undoubtedly and unquestionably mad. But we cannot extract the conclusion by these certain convincing explanation, because if we study, the manner in which the lover relates the whole story, does not indicate at all, nay kind of disorder or abnormality in his mind. If we give the another clue to the explanation of the murdering of the beloved by lover himself, that such crime is the ugly result of going strayed for a moment, the intensely excited mental position. But, after pros and cons, this outlook is not acceptable because here we find no marks of regret or repentance after the will of murdering is executed, on the contrary, he seems more happy and contended of proud of securing the wished and perfect moment of her complete surrender to him:

She put arm about her waist,
And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
And all her yellow hair displaced,
And stooping, made my cheek lie there,
And spread, over all her yellow hair,
Murmuring how she loved me. (Porphyria’s Lover L 16-21)

In the opinion of H.C. Duffin; “The lover seems pretending to murder Porphyria, he goes on saying that it is a complicated matter of psychological deviations: “It would evidently make the picture more pleasing if we could take them to mean pretended to stranger her, and since the rest of the poem favors this reading I do not see why we should not get pleasure instead of horror out of the poem. (Duffin 1962) In the views of Johnson (1992), “The central problem in Browning’s love poetry is invariably one of communication between the sexes. The intangible influences which encourage or destroy intimacy between men and women elicit all his skill in psychological analysis: for love exists in an through human intuitions. Reference has already been made to the poet’s belief that destined lovers recognize each other on first sight.
Thus, Browning’s whole life achievement rests on his love which served him as a stepping stone to success and which ultimately became a mile-stone of his success in the both the fields-personal or literacy. Love is not only a success bringer for Browning rather everyone, who loves truly and passionately, becomes successful in almost all the corners of life. Some one has rightly said that behind every successful man, there is a woman, and this is the lady, Elizabeth, who works as an abrupt force behind the potentially of this love poetry, and thus, with the help of this loving inspiration, this man succeed in life. Love is also a boon for woman-being. The heart of woman can rest with peace and happiness in the strong arms of her love partner, as a bond of security, help and shelter with the sweet fragrance of love. Thus, love is the way to success for everyone and in everything, that brings wished success in each field, as one of the functions of love as a success bringer and is the experience in our own life too.
Works Cited


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