

A Hidden Narrative: Examining the Emissary's Position in Browning's 'My Last Duchess'

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Abstract

Dramatic Monologue was a prominent poetic form in the Victorian age, characterised by a single speaker addressing an unknown, silent audience. Robert Browning, who experimented much with the form and wrote remarkable dramatic monologues, "My Last Duchess" stands out for masterful use of the form and compelling subject matter. The interesting part of the monologue for this paper is the silent listener, the emissary who listens to what the speaker, the Duke, has to say. It does not speak throughout the poem. The Duke talks to the emissary of his previous marriage and how his former wife was not up to the mark. She never respected Duke's nine hundred years old family, this infuriated the Duke, and he ordered to stop "all smiles". The paper presents a reinterpretation of the poem "My Last Duchess" which contrasts with the conventional interpretations. It shifts the focus from the dominating narrative in the poem that is the story of the Duchess to the inconspicuous audience of the poem. It looks at the emissary and his possible subaltern position and its causes in the poem.

Keywords : subaltern, dowry, hegemony, culture, Italy, history from below

Defining Subaltern

The term "subaltern" has been defined by Cambridge Dictionary as "an army officer whose rank is lower than captain" (Cambridge Dictionary). Antonio Gramsci, who coined the term for his hegemonic discourse in his seminal text "Prison Notebooks", uses this word differently from the literal meaning of the term. "The subaltern for Gramsci is not defined by an experience of exclusion. On the contrary, subaltern social groups are represented in the Prison Notebooks as integrally and actively "included" or integrated into the hegemonic relations of what Gramsci characterizes as the bourgeois "integral state"." (Thomas) However, in the postcolonial context the meaning has been thus changed. In the leadership of Ranajit Guha, the Subaltern Studies reader has taken to look at the historiography of colonial and post-colonial India. In his journal 'Subaltern Studies Reader' Guha took to writing the history of India from "the below". The group worked and brought forward the subjugated and oppressed people in the history, which were severely neglected by the elite and Eurocentric historiography. Gyan Prakash in his article 'Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Criticism' formulates the group's motive as "Subaltern Studies plunged into this historiographical contest over the representation of the

culture and politics of the people. Accusing colonialist, nationalist, and Marxist interpretations of robbing the common people of their agency, it announced a new approach to restore history to the subordinated." (1477)

Spivak in her seminal essay "Can the subaltern speak?", has given a new spin to the subaltern. In her essay, she says that the subaltern might not speak, but it has other ways to assert its agency and resist the hegemonic structure. So, the basic idea that comes out of the various usage and definitions of the term subaltern is that, subaltern is someone who does not belong either to the elite or the marginalized. It is a character who is somewhere in the middle. It does not have a voice or agency, the history does not talk about it.

Browning and 'My Last Duchess'

Browning has written many dramatic monologues whose protagonists are Italian. Fra Lippo Lippi, Andrea del Sarto, The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church, and the poem in consideration here, that is My Last Duchess. The Duke of Ferrara, who is the speaker of the poem, named Alfonso II d'Este, is getting married for the second time. The Duke is attending an emissary who has come to negotiate his second marriage from the bride's

family. He takes the emissary to show him his collection of pieces of art in his gallery. The duke shows a portrait to the emissary, saying that nobody else has permission to see the portrait-

“(since none puts by The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)”

The portrait is of the previous duchess painted by Fra Pandolf in just a day, the Duke starts to tell the features of the Duchess and how was her behaviour and general attitude towards life. The duke tells the emissary that the last duchess loved all things the same. He accuses her of thanking men, but Duke doesn't object to her thanking men but in her way of thanking them. The Duke thinks that she thanked men in such a way as if she looked at the Duke's gift of a “nine-hundred-years-old name” and a gift of the common men with the same eye. Friedland in his essay “Ferrara and My Last Duchess” talks about the jealousies of the Duke, “it may be more properly termed an egotist's overweening desire for possessiveness, an egotist who is either unwilling to content himself with a normal degree of possession or, physically incapable of attaining it, exacts the last measure of obedience to his will for exclusive ownership. No smile, no gleam, no sparkle, but shall be directed towards him alone. Hence, even while his Duchess is still alive, he reduces her to an object of art, a private possession cut off from the world.” (Friedland 674-675). The Duke says that even if it was easier to tell his Duchess the things that disgust him, he would never do that because it would lower his status. He is never going to stoop, but he chooses to kill her instead. The Duke has an intimidating tone, he asks the emissary to move to but stops him to tell him that he expects a high dowry. The poem ends on the Duke giving another insight of his psyche by pointing towards a bronze statue of Neptune “Taming a sea-horse”.

Locating the Subaltern

To locate a subaltern character in the poem, it is important to see who does not speak in the poem, who does not possess a voice of themselves. There are probably two evidently present characters, the Duke and the emissary. There is also one silent character who is the subject of the Duke's monologue, which is the Duchess. In the context of the poem, we find that the emissary is silent throughout the

poem, and he does not have any voice whatsoever. He listens to everything that the duke has to say but never responds. The duke intimidates him and commands him, he fearlessly tells all about his former wife and how he took care of her, he knows that the emissary needs to be intimidated to extort a fat dowry. He has indicated multiple times in the poem of his excellence and power, so that the emissary and the family of the new duchess would be impressed. He shows to the emissary his collection of the art pieces that people had made only for him, the portrait of the duchess was made by Fra Pandolf, the statue of Neptune taming a sea-horse, and his nine years old name (indicates at the fact that his family is old and powerful in Italy).

The classrooms of literature around the world while teaching this poem primarily cling to the superficial story which the poem narrates in its due course, and forget the underlying, more hegemonic tone, the poem possesses. To uncover the camouflaged history of the poem one needs to get down to the narrative which is not conspicuous in the first look, to the narrative on which the poem is truly based and for which the poem prepares ground. The poem runs the narrative of the duke, how he hated his wife and how he did away with her. Only at the end of the poem that the duke says to the emissary of his principal concern, the dowry. The build-up, the poem has before these lines are merely a preparation of enunciation of his demand for dowry, which comes in the end of the poem in these lines-

“I repeat,

The Count your master's known munificence

Is ample warrant that no just pretense

Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;” (Browning)

The duke's primary motive of getting married is not because he has killed his previous wife and now is faced with various nuptial or worldly urges. Caroline Murphy in her book *Murder of a Medici Princess* describes the death of Lucrezia de' Medici. According to her the Duke most probably never killed his wife, she was severely ailing of tuberculosis for a month and died on 20 April 1561 (87). The question then arises is what the line “*I gave commands; Then all smiles stopped together.*” means, it surely looks like when the Duke has had too much of the Duchesses' smiles, he gave commands to either kill her or

to capture her and lock her up in some dungeon. In both of the cases, it is very probable that the Duke is just trying to intimidate the subaltern audience of the poem. The duke is not just filling the emissary's heart with fear for the sake of jesting, he has real perceptible motive behind his talks about his former wife. He is telling the emissary all of this because he wants dowry out of this new wedding of his. He wants the emissary to deliver his message to his count of a huge dowry. The Duke quite wanted his dowry, and his rapacity for the dowry might be there because of the severe lack of capital among the Italian families during the renaissance period. Though the Duke claims that his family is one of the oldest families, and he counts it back to "*nine-hundred-years-old*", one can expect his family to be opulent, but the question arises, why is he asking for dowry and talking about the "*munificence*" of his to-be in-law.

Reasons for Duke's Demands

Looking into history, the most plausible reason which comes forward is the cause which affected the course of human history, the famine. Famine has been defined as severe lack of food or purchasing power, which results in an increased number of deaths from hunger. Famine as Guido Alfani in his research about Italian famines, showed that at the time of Alfonso II's rule in Ferrara that is 1559-97, the northern part of Italy was hit by the worst famines of all time. With burial rates rising as high as 100% to 250%. Cities like Udine, Bassano, Pavia, Modena, Paesaro and Florence were destroyed by famines. (Alfani et al. 17) Since the Duchy of Ferrara is surrounded by Florence, Modena and Pavia, famine was rampant in this area as well. Famines were not only the result of lack of food, if there only was dearth of food, the local authorities are responsible to take necessary steps to provide the people with food materials, but Alfani Guido notes that a dearth develops into a famine only after a total agrarian and institutional failure. (Alfani Par. 20)

Furthermore, the widespread Wars of Italy which started in 1494 with the expedition of Charles VIII. These wars went on until the final peace of Cateau-Cambrésis in 1559. These wars were fought between France, Spain with various alliances in Italy for supremacy over the peninsula. Whatever damage to life and property, this war may have incurred, but the damage which concerns us here is the

damage to crops and harvest. During this war, crops were being destroyed, and even the stored grains were being exhausted on feeding soldiers. There was also a dire lack of livestock, as the soldiers were being fed on them. This made it extremely difficult (and almost impossible in the case of sieges), for the authorities to procure grains for the population. The situation of Italian regions was very aptly described by the representatives of the city Parma, in a letter to the Pope. The letter is dated 13th February 1527, and it is translated from Italian to English by Albani himself. "All around in the countryside, up to six miles from the city, there is no bread, no wine, no hay, no straw, especially where our soldiers were and are billeted, no food reserves, no barrels [of wine or other], but everything has been burned. Each day houses and granaries continue to be burned, great quantities of hay and straw have been lost, many beasts great and small are eaten by the soldiers, who are openly robbing us, they sack houses in many places as if they were Spanish or Landsknechts [...]. Streets are unsafe, merchants are kidnapped and all goods and every kind of food being transferred by road are stolen. In much of the territory of Parma work has stopped, they are not sowing fave [broad beans], veze and other legumes that make for much of the crop, vines are not pruned, woods are not cut." (Albani par. 21)

The letter lays bare the role war has played in bringing famine into the land. All goods being transferred by the road were stolen and beasts were eaten by the soldiers, granaries and houses were being burned. These are concerning issues for a land which was still recovering from the Black Death epidemic of the fourteenth century.

Diseases made things worse for states in northern Italy. John M. Najemy in his book "Italy in the Age of the Renaissance: 1300-1550" talks about the impact of diseases like plague and syphilis in the chapter "Bodies, disease, and society". He notes that the plague was so rampant in Italy around the year of 1527 that it was claiming almost 500 lives every single day. (109) In a country which was so severely hit by plague some decades ago and still in the recovery phase, it is very improbable that any ruler still has any wealth left. Ferrara, much like the rest of Italy, was recovering from the widespread devastation caused by famine and the diseases. It needed capital to purchase or even produce

food, and since Duke's wife who recently died either because of tuberculosis or the duke killed or imprisoned her, the Duke has the golden chance to gouge huge dowry amount from his next marriage so that he could fill his coffers and if he would've been benevolent, to feed his subject.

The Duke's demand for dowry is also a matter of enquiry, why did he demand for dowry? It is not so that the plague, famine and his penury are the sole reasons for his asking for the dowry. The base of his decision to actually demand for a huge dowry relies on the cultural practices of his time. The culture of Italy in early modern times required transfer of wealth between the families involved in marriage, Michael Guinn in his research regarding dowry in medieval Italy titled "He Who Marries Is Looking for Cash: Dowry and the Marketplace of Marriage in the Italian Renaissance", notes in the opening paragraphs that "Marriage in the Italian Renaissance was motivated fundamentally as an exchange of property and financial resources from the bride's family to the groom's." (141) Dowry was necessary for the marriage in renaissance Italy, Sharon T. Strocchia writes in her essay entitled "Gender and the Rites of Honor in Italian Renaissance Cities", that "in Renaissance Italy, where arranged marriages were the rule, there could be no marriage without a dowry, regardless of class" (44). It says "regardless of class", it is possible that a Duke who has coffers full of affluence may not ask for a huge dowry or any dowry at all. Alfonso II however is obsessed with dowry, his concern and greed for dowry is there for two major reasons, first could be out of need, because natural causes have descended crude penury over his region and the prevailing culture of giving huge dowry to the bridegrooms in Italy.

In Friedland's research, the marriage which is being negotiated in the poem is of Alfonso II's with the daughter of Ferdinand I of Vienna. The negotiations were in process and the marriage was fixed, but the death of Ferdinand I caused confusion between the families whether the new Archduke, son of Ferdinand I, Maximilian II and his two brothers would agree to the marriage or not. The silent emissary who is conducting the negotiations anew is named as "Nikalaus Madruz" by Friedland. (682) The master of whom Browning is talking about by referring to him as "The Count your master's" is actually Maximilian II.

Conclusion

The poem ends when the Duke finishes showcasing his former wife's portrait. He asks the emissary to go downstairs, to meet the rest of the "company". As the emissary starts to leave the Duke says to him-

"Nay, we'll go

Together down, sir."

The Duke possesses such an intimidating tone throughout the poem, which indicates his intentions of keeping the emissary in his subjugation so that he would try his best to get what the Duke has asked for. Not having a voice of his own, the emissary only listens to the Duke's monologue. He is stuck in the middle of two power structures, first is the Duke and second is his master, the Count. He has to fix the marriage of his Count's daughter that is his duty to his master, and he also has to get a huge dowry fixed for the impecunious Duke as he asked him. The emissary cannot do anything, he has no agency of his own but to comply with their orders. The emissary however succeeded in bringing the two families together after all, and the marriage was consolidated in the year 1565 at the dowry amount of "cento mila Fiorini Renani" (one hundred thousand Renani Florins). (Friedland 682).

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