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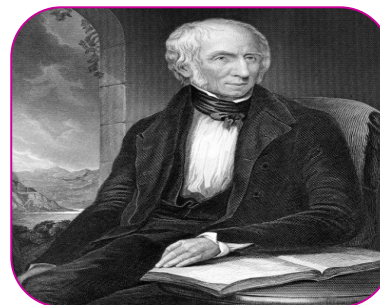
A GLIMPSE INTO THE NINETEENTH SOCIETY AS REFLECTED IN POETIC WORKS

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ABSTRACT

Literary representation can offer us reflections of the life and times of a particular age. In my research paper I intend to take up certain poems published in the nineteenth century which can offer us a better understanding of the city and country divide. Written during the period of industrial revolution, the poems register the migration of population to the cities in search of work, the changing relations of production from the primitive and agrarian methods to that of the machines. If the beginning of the nineteenth century saw the call of Wordsworth's 'back to nature' and the Romantics yearning for the rustic life, the late Victorian embraced the city life and sang the verses of progress. But in the later Romanic as well as Victorian period we see a shift in the taste of writing. The response to the new is essentially thus set in paradox. Our examination of Wordsworth's 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge' becomes the starting point of such a discovery. Poems of the time were more inclined towards expressing the beauty of city in place of wild natural beauty. For some poets like William MC Gonagall, the city life became a new subject of creation. In the poem, "A Toccata of Galuppi's" by Robert Browning, we get a sketch about the Industrial Revolution and how the population shift to the city resulted as a consequence of the same. Again in the poem, "Duns Scotus's Oxford" by Manley Hopkins, we get a direct proof of the shift. We also witness the poet suggesting a kind of tension between City and Country. This tension is later on turned into disgust and frustration as a result of industrialised city life, in the hands of poets like William Blake and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. While examining the shift from the rural to the urban, critics have emphasizes more on finding a reflection of such changing patterns in novels and theatres. Poems have majorly either been overlooked or have not been treated with adequate importance. In my paper I will focus more on the lesser known poets as well as the famous writers of the Victorian period and will try to show how the city shapes up as a part of their idealized subject of study.



KEYWORDS : *Poems, Nineteenth century society, William Wordsworth, William MC Gonagall, Industrial revolution, City life, Population shift, Migration.*

INTRODUCTION

Whenever we talk about the Victorian literature, the first thing that strikes our mind is novels. It is seen that works of certain Victorian poets have either been ignored or have not been treated with adequate importance. The era of industrial revolution, followed by the great shift from country to city holds an immense value in the lives of the present day people, since even though once our ancestors decided city was the 'new' land full of wondrous new ways of livelihood, now in the present era, we feel the immense pressure and

claustrophobia of city life. This feeling brings in us the urge to imagine the fresh country air, and wish for an escape to the 'Daffodil' filled mountains of Wordsworth's poetry. In my research paper I intend to take up certain poems published in the Nineteenth Century, set in the backdrop of industrialization, which can offer us a better understanding of the city and the country divide. The poems focus on the growth and development of the idea of 'city', how the new 'city' is being created in the minds of the people, how is the city shaping up the lives of the people who are going there in search of employment or to live in it, how does the establishment of the city bring out the class divide between the rich and the poor and last but not the least how is the city becoming an important topic in literature. Starting from the Romantic poems I intend to examine the poems written in the early and late Victorian period and analyse how the image of the city is introduced in their works. Is it a sort of fascinating place which is thrillingly different from the country? Or, is it being identified as the ugly replacement of the idyllic country life, turned into the den of darkness? What is the nature of this duality and how is it negotiated by certain poets is my area of concern.

The late Eighteenth Century saw the call of Wordsworth's, 'back to nature'. But, the nature addicted, Romantic poet also underwent a change in theme during the early Nineteenth Century. In 1802 he wrote, 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge', in which the poet describes the city of London in the breaking light of dawn. The poet observes the London city in its calm, silent, smokeless background. While describing the city he talks about, 'ships', 'towers', 'domes', 'theatres' and 'temples', through which the thrived trade, advanced waterway communication system, architectural development as well as the cultural enrichment of the society is observed. Again in 1802 Wordsworth composed, 'Written in London', in which he addresses London city as his friend and shares his mental unrest. His view about the city is seen to have changed from that of 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge'. This time he feels the artificiality and monotonousness of the industrious city life. He says,

“being as I am, opprest,
To think that now our life is only drest
For show; mean handy-work of craftsman, cook,
Or groom!”

It is often said that Victorian poetry lacked essence of deep feelings and were thought to be mechanical in nature, which resulted as the cause of their unpopularity. But, did we ever think why it was so! Basically the social and political issues like industrial revolution and slavery fed the Victorian poets. Taking rapine, avarice and exploitations as themes, it was impossible to employ imagination and lyrical purity. The poets of this period primarily focussed on giving us a clear view about the industrial revolution and other social conditions. The poem 'In a London Drawing Room' composed by George Eliot in 1869 is an excellent depiction of the industrious city and its condition. He says, "The sky is cloudy, yellowed by smoke." Referring to the pollution caused due to the industrialization. He also talks about the uncountable houses and the overpopulated city. At the end of the poem we get to know his actual view about the city.

“The world seems one huge prison-house & court
Where men are punished at the slightest cost,
With lowest rate of colour, warmth & joy.”

In certain poems by Robert Browning published in a collection of poems named, 'Men and Women', in the year 1855, we witness a direct comparison between the country and city. The duality of country and city is put to question. In the first half of the poem 'Love among the Ruins', Browning begins by describing a pastoral landscape but then he says, "Was the site, one of the city great and gay." Thus, it is not directly revealed that the poet wants to beautify the city or the country in this poem. Rather he sings praises to both the places. But, in his other poem 'Up at a Villa – Down in the City' published in the same collection of poems, we see his view clearly conveyed. He opens the poem expressing his intense desire to have a house in the city square. He uses animalistic language to reflect life at the villa. But, while he describes the city his heart filled joy and urge to spend his life in the city. He says,

“But the city, oh the city – the square with the houses! Why?
They are stone-faced, white as a curd, there’s something to take the eye!
Houses in four straight lines, not a single front awry;
You watch who crosses and gossips, who saunters, who hurries by;

Through these lines we also come to know about the type of houses in the city and a bit about the house planning at that time. Even the contrasting activities like gossiping and busy nature of city people is painted in his poem. Not just the direct comparison between country and city but the feminine cultural aspects of the two places were also juxtaposed in the poem ‘The Ruined Maid’ by Thomas Hardy. This poem is a dialogue between, two young ladies, who has left farm life and ventured into the city. The first speaker, an unnamed woman comments on Malia’s new cloths, jewelleries, and aristocratic attitude. All Malia replies, is that she has now become a ruined so she has all this. At the end of the poem we see the urge of being like Malia in the other simple country girl. She says,

--“I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown,
And a delicate face, and could strut about Town!” –

Now, we see a group of Victorian poets painting the city life in happy joyous colours. They are fascinated by the new developing city life thus, giving us a detailed description of the city life and fancies at that age. The poem ‘Descriptive Jotting of London’ by William McGonagall is an excellent example. He opens the poem saying,

“As I stood upon London Bridge and viewed the mighty throng
Of thousands of people in cabs and ‘busses rapidly whirling along,
All furiously driving to and fro,
Up one street and down another as quick as they go:”

This gives us an idea about the overflowing population and modified vehicles in the city. Other than that, he describes the beauties of the city, which are, the Tower of London, St. Paul’s Cathedral and Nelson’s Monument. He also talks about the high classed people both young and old, who spend money countlessly for dresses and petticoats. In the poem, ‘Duns Scotus’s Oxford’, Gerard Manley Hopkins praises the city of Oxford, Britain’s oldest University, in the first quatrain. He takes an overall view of the cityscape, trying to detail its particular inscape, which is done visually and aurally in terms of shape, shades and sound. By writing the line,

“that country and town did
Once encounter in, here coped and poised powers;”

He suggests some tension between the city and country. He also uses the word “graceless” while describing the city through which he suggests the unloved and Godless nature of the city. A different view of the city is expressed by Mathew Arnold in his poem, ‘Lines written in Kensington Garden’. He tries to find the beauty of nature in the Kensington garden situated inside the city. According to him, though the city is beautiful, the garden takes him back to the feeling of being in a country side. Arnold states,

“In the huge world, which roars hard by,
Be others happy if they can!
But in my helpless cradle I
Was breathed on by the rural Pan.”

Other poets of the Victorian period aimed at showing misery and sadness of common people which lay behind the curtains of the polished city life. The exploitation of lower class and how they became mere victims of the industrial life leading to their destruction is portrayed in these poems. Rudyard Kipling in his

poem, 'Songs of the Galley – Slaves', first published in 'Departmental Ditties and other Verses' (fourth Edition) in the year 1890 talks about slavery system. He gives us a visual detail of how the slaves were treated by their masters and made to "row" until their "knees were cut to bone". He writes from the view point of the slaves, saying,

"We fainted with our chains on the oars and you did not see that we were idle,

for we still swung to and fro.
Will you never let us go?

He expresses their utmost fear of never becoming free. The next poem selected is, 'The Cry of the Children' by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, first published in the year 1845. This poem puts forward the harshness of slavery system prevalent during that time. Her point was that, cruel slavery system did not allow even children to escape from its death chains. Child labour was also practiced which led to the mental and physical downfall of the youth. The children are crying bitterly and wishing for their untimely death to get rid of the pain of slavery. Mrs Browning says,

"For oh," say the children, "we are weary,
And we cannot run or leap —
If we cared for any meadows, it were merely
To drop down in them and sleep.
Our knees tremble sorely in the stooping —
We fall upon our faces, trying to go ;
And, underneath our heavy eyelids drooping,
The reddest flower would look as pale as snow.
For, all day, we drag our burden tiring,
Through the coal-dark, underground —
Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron
In the factories, round and round.

Under the garb of progress, the underlying poverty threatens to disrupt the progress. In the poem, 'The Little Match Girl' written by William MC Gonagall, referred to again in the year 1845 we see his idealistic view about the city life has changed. He now looks deeper into the underlined condition of the low ranking working class people of the society. He also shows us, how children are forced to become workers and their failures may cost them their lives. In this poem his focus is a little girl selling matches, who is poverty stricken and trembles in the snow filled street of the city. The girl fails to sell any match and could not return home in the snow, hungry and shivering in the cold, she died. Revealing the true picture of the heartless high class people of London the poet says,

"In that mighty city of London, wherein is plenty of gold—

But, alas! their charity towards street waifs is rather cold.
But I hope the match girl's in Heaven, beside her Saviour dear,
A bright reward for all the hardships she suffered here."

Perhaps the biggest critic of industrialization is William Blake, who for us belonged to the Pre-Romantic period but is very much contemporary. His poem 'London', published in 1794 in 'The Songs of Experience' is a direct proof of the fact. In this poem he can practically hear the cries of London city, trapped within chains of slavery and says,

"In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear"

After the Victorian period, the age of machines and world-wide Industrialization established its foundation stone. In the writings of modernist writers like T.S Eliot, we see the mechanical city life being displayed. Even today, the high class mechanical capitalist society is ruling the world. And, Blake's wish of building Jerusalem again by bringing back "England's Green and pleasant land", still remains an unfulfilled dream.



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