

Charlotte Bronte's Poetic Genius: A Critical Study of Apostasy, Life, and On the Death of Anne Bronte

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Abstract:

*Charlotte Bronte was not a successful poet in her own day, and today she is still rightfully known for her novels rather than for her poems. The inevitable comparisons between Emily's terse romantic lyrics and her sister's more discursive poetic style have produced a lower estimate of her poems than they probably deserve. "Pilate's Wife's Dream," for example, is arguably a much better poetic monologue than Elizabeth Barrett Browning's well-known "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point." Bronte is an important figure in the history of nineteenth-century poetry because her career illustrates the shift in literary tastes from poetry to prose fiction and because she employed, sometimes quite skilfully, the poetic modes that became characteristic of the Victorian period. If one agrees with Virginia Woolf's claim in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* that Charlotte Bronte's novels are read "for her poetry," one might argue that Bronte never did entirely abandon her career as a poet. Adapting her creative impulses to the demands of the market, Bronte incorporated poetic features into the more viable form of the novel, and so became a successful literary professional in Victorian England and a "major author" in the accepted canon of British literature.*

Keywords- discursive poetic style, poetic monologue, nineteenth century poetry, Victorian period, poetic features, canon of British literature.

Literary propriety demands critical appraisal of some of her chosen poems for clarifying her position as a poetess. Comparison and contrast makes one's point lucid and vivid. It is not for nothing that T.S. Eliot has said in his essay *Tradition and Individual Talent*: Comparison and analysis are the chief tools of criticism. (17) That is why I have made humble and sincere effort to examine Charlotte Bronte's poems in the backdrop of English religious poets and also Indian poets in English literature.

1. Apostasy

Like George Herbert (Metaphysical poet) Charlotte Bronte's mind was torn by doubt and belief in Him. Very often she introspected the basis of her faith in Him, many a time passed through the state of apostasy but soon the soul within quenched the restlessness boiling within her. Like Milton the great, her soul silenced her questioning spirit. One is reminded of *On His Blindness* (a famous sonnet) by Milton "How would I serve you when you have blinded me", then and there his spirit answered:

"They also serve who only stands and waits". (62) In the same vein when Charlotte Bronte fell into the state of apostasy

‘ ... T was not a grey, bare head, like thine,
Bent o'er me, when I said,
That land and God and Faith are mine... ’(7)
Again he murmurs and says: ‘...
I see thee not, my eyes are dim;

But, well I hear thee say,
O daughter, cease to think of him
Who led thy soul astray.....' (7)

She comes back to herself and points strongly her faith in Him. All her poems are a dialogue with her soul about the very existence of God. We very often hear two voices (one of faith and another of doubt) like the poems of Lord Tennyson who says in Uphill. Tennyson says that one beholds the Golden Gate of God's kingdom when one passes through the gate of death. Everything becomes vivid. Nothing is seen so long as one is far away from death. The zero hour arrives and one finds standing face to face with Him. She needs to be compared and contrasted with Lord Tennyson of her own period.

It would be very interesting if one compares and contrasts her with Rabindra Nath Tagore in the Gitanjali, the spokesman of Indian faith in Him. All his poems reflect how an Indian devotee quarries with Him and submits oneself to Him. Charlotte Bronte was religious mystic. She beholds Him when she finds her oneself submerged in the thick gloom of doubt. She says: 'Think not of him who led thy soul astray'. I am reminded of the Bible where the Lord says: Ask and you shall receive, it occurs not immediately but it occurs nevertheless'.

(30) The Bible avers that the strength lies in one's faith in Him. It is the quality of faith which makes all the difference. Unquestioning faith with total submission to Him makes Him responsive. It is the devotee who makes Him hear and say. God lies in one's faith. This is the core and centre of all the poems of Charlotte Bronte. The same feeling is seen in Sarojani Naidu:

'... O faithless one, self-slain with doubt,
Why seekest thou my loveliness without.'(26)

2. Life

It was Shelley who tried to define life through his poems. We hear his echo in the poems of Longfellow, a great American poet once again one may hear the voice of Shelley while going through the poem 'Life' by Charlotte Bronte. Just like Shelley, Charlotte Bronte has philosophized all that she believed in her poems. The very placing of the words in her poems renders her style conversational. She talks to the reader and dictates them to believe that life is not a dream. 'Life, believe, is not a dream.'

Life, believe, is not a dream:
So dark as sages say;
Oft a little morning rain
Foretells a pleasant day...(25)

Like Shelley Charlotte Bronte visualises a ray of hope even in the throe of gloom. She was no less optimist than Shelley and Browning in English Literature. One hears the triumphant call of Shelley in his 'Ode to the West Wind' : If Winter comes, can spring be far behind? (297) There is none who can withhold the fast moving mighty feet of a bright morning. She wants us to enjoy the merry dance of joy enacted before us. Like Milton in The Paradise Lost who has said what though if we have been defeated, she says:

"What though Death at times steps in
And calls our best away?"

She was a poet of hope dream as Shelley was in English Literature.

"Yet hope again elastic springs,
Unconquered, though she fell;
Still buoyant are her golden wings".(25)

Like Shelley she writes in the praise of Hope. It is hope which sustains us in all the hours of despair and gloom. Shelley sings and would continue to sing through larks: "Till the world is wrought to sympathy with hope and fear it needed not." (244) Here is a female voice endorsing the male voice (Shelley) supporting the supremacy of hope in life. She is a female counterpart of P.B. Shelley in English Literature.

3. On the Death of Anne Bronte

Whenever a poet or a poetess writes upon another poet or poetess or a sister younger or elder writes upon her own younger or elder sister it gives a sense of authenticity, intimacy and revelation of some hidden truth. For example W. H. Auden wrote on W.B. Yeats and Browning wrote on Shakespeare. Such poems are not collection of memoirs. They reveal some hidden truth about the poets. Such poems have always been considered sacred in the domain of English literature. On the Death of Anne Bronte by Charlotte Bronte is one of such poems. Charlotte Bronte breathes out her sense of loss and grief over the sad demise of her younger sister when she says; 'There is Little joy in life for me'. These two lines reveal her intimate connection with Anne Bronte and the resultant sense of grief over her parting from her. She fell half in love with death which might have eased the piercing pang of sorrow. She has described the impact of her sister's death on her heart and mind like Wordsworth who expressed his sorrow over the sad death of his beloved – A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal'.

She was the hope and glory of her life. She felt a sense of loneliness and a sense of being a state of exile after her death because she went away from her own self. Now she would face the weary strife of life alone. This sense of loneliness irks her most. The little poem exhales her intense pathos over her dear sister's death. But she seeks divine mercy to have strength enough to bear it alone. Her faith in supreme being is betrayed in this poem.

She knows the death is inevitable and it is sure to separate one from the other in this wide world. She has strong faith in merciful hands of God. He alone would give her strength to bear up the miserable life in the absence of her sister.

She extols the sacred memory of her dear sister over the might of cruel death. Death can kill her physical form but not her memory that she has in her heart. And so she reiterates that weeping is of no use so long as the memory is there she concludes, 'Never doubt for present'...

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