

Literary Responses to Childhood Miseries and Child Labour: An Assessment of Select 18th and 19th Century Texts

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Abstract: *The 18th and 19th century in England, in many ways, were eras of social and cultural paradoxes. While exploitation of labour and children increased to a point of insensibility, social movements resisting such practices also came into existence. It was an era of conscience raising through art and literature, with the writers and artists assuming the role of social critics. This paper makes an attempt to take a journey into the literary expressions of 18th and 19th century that reflect and resist child abuse and child labour. The paper will primarily focus on one essay - "The Praise of Chimney Sweepers" (1823) by Charles Lamb, as well as the poem "The Cry of the Children" (1843) by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Certain other texts too are mentioned in this paper to explore the differential treatment given to child abuse and child labour.*

The basic method used in the paper is that of analytical study and the selected texts are read closely to see how these writers construct images, appeals, and social awareness. The paper also explores the literary irony of these centuries – a spurt in children’s literature even while child abuse and child labour were on the increase.

Key Terms: *Child Abuse, Childhood, Children’s Literature, Imagery, Rhythm*

I. Introduction

People of the 18th and 19th century England, among them renowned writers, have asked themselves questions on childhood and child labour in the same way as we today. They too struggled with very similar problems only in a different country and time.

Living in India now for several years and having worked in an orphanage in Pune with children rescued from abuse and poverty, I have concerned myself with the conditions of children in India and often tried to find a suitable reaction for myself – for react we must. Therefore, but also for their aesthetic merit, we should take a look at literary texts – an essay and a poem - by two representatives of their periods, Charles Lamb and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in order to find a solution for our own age and country.

II. Eras of Change

The Romantic Period (1798-1837) and the Victorian Era (1837-1901), were marked by great changes, as new ideas came to the forefront and with them new machinery and finally the advent of the Industrial Revolution. These features are often seen in the literature of both the Romantic and Victorian writers. David Daiches points out that “the beginning of the Industrial Revolution towards the end of the century produced a very different view of the value of life in urban society from that found in the Queen Anne writers,” [1] indicating a change in the approach to life in general.

In an essay called “Picturing the Child in Nineteenth-Century Literature” by Jacquelyn Spratlin Rogers, the author looks on this new view on life and children as she asks the rhetorical question, why children were depicted as “miniature adults” in illustrations of books of the same period. The answer, the author writes, can be found in the society of the time. The author lists the reasons for children not having a childhood as we understand it, some being “high mortality rate of children due to poor nutrition, work hazards, and disease played an important role” [2]. The children were not allowed to be children, the period of childhood was seen as a dangerous period and the children’s “clothing, work, responsibilities, and attitudes...mimicked the adults” [3]. The main reason for the absence of a childhood, in 19th century England, was the need for cheap labour with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution as factories and mines were established. Children were thrown into dangerous situations since the labour in coal mines and factories with unfenced machines and chemicals was a constant threat to the children’s health. Children even started working at the tender age of four and five. A Factory Act of 1833 was passed, which set the minimum age for children working in factories to nine, but it was rarely followed. Many of the smallest children were working as “trappers” in coal mines and their work consisted of opening trap doors for coal carts, whereas the older children from the age of six used to drag loaded coal carts. Another, specifically British tradition, was the custom of cleaning chimneys by sending tiny boys and girls up the chimneys. They would be taken as apprentices as early as four years of age. Historically it is

believed that children were only used since the 18th century for the purpose of cleaning chimneys, since “more complicated and narrow chimney systems of eighteenth-century houses” [4] became common. Many writers of the Romantic and Victorian Period sympathized with the children of their age, among them were Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who inspired calls for reform, writing pamphlets and letters on child labour.

III. Images of Child Labour in Charles Lamb

Charles Lamb’s essay “The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers” in the collection entitled *Essays of Elia* (1820-23), as he writes in the Romantic tradition of his age, reveals his “zest for the picturesque and the oddly individual in human character, and his occasional almost fierce attacks on the lack of human kindness” [5]. And like many of his essays, like the well-known essay “Dream-Children”, “The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers” is a highly personal and sentimental poem even if the title does suggest differently. Lamb begins his essay saying, “I like to meet a sweep...one of those tender novices, blooming through their first nigritude” [6]. Right at the beginning Lamb takes his reader for a walk on the streets of London, where chimney sweepers were a common sight at his time. Lamb further makes obvious reference to Blake’s poem “The Chimney Sweeper” (1789 & 1892) with likening the chimney sweeper’s call “weep, weep” to the “peep, peep of a young sparrow.” The sparrow usually emits these sounds when it calls for food, so it is ironical that the chimney sweeper is calling with a similar sound for work at his tender age. Lamb jumps from one image to another as he continues his essay “I reverence these young Africans of our own growth...and from their little pulpits (the tops of chimneys), in the nipping air of December morning, preach a lesson of patience to mankind” [7]. Calling the chimney sweeper an African was not unusual since the effort to emancipate them was compared to the fight against slavery.

As is typical for Lamb, he then reminisces about his own childhood in the essay, recalling how when he was a child he saw “a chit no bigger than one’s self” and how he had been amazed to see a child disappear into a chimney and “running out of doors, to come just in time to see the sable phenomenon emerge in safety” [8]. Lamb then continues to give his glimpses of London city life, as he observes that chimney sweepers have a liking for a brew made out of “sassafras...This wood, boiled down to a kind of tea” and then he gives a lively description of a chimney sweeper consuming this tea, “Being penniless, they will yet hang their black heads over the ascending steam, to gratify one sense if possible, seemingly no less pleased than those domestic animals – cats – when they purr over a new-found sprig of valerian” [9]. Lamb then imagines that the white teeth of some chimney sweepers are evidence for their “good blood and nobility.” He retells a story that actually happened and is well-known from a scene at the beginning of Charles Kingsley’s *The Water-Babies* (1863), namely a chimney sweeper lost his way and got down the wrong chimney while cleaning the chimneys of Arundel Castle. Finding a bed with clean bed sheets in the strange room, he lay down in it and was found there “at noonday,” which to Lamb appears to be another evidence for the chimney sweeper to be a “young nobleman.” Again Lamb sets the dark and dirty world of the chimney sweeper in stark contrast to the Castle, the royal chamber and a “pair of sheets whiter and softer than the lap where Venus lulled Ascanius” [10]. Comparing the life of the poor and dirty chimney sweepers with life in a Castle or the readers of better means, is a way for Lamb to defamiliarise the reader and in a way shock him out of his comfort zone. His main aim becomes clearer near the end, which seems to evoke a feeling of sympathy and pity for these children and, it could be argued, for himself as well, as it is suggested that he liked to “parade himself” [11]. Therefore the last section of his essay can be looked at with mixed feelings as Lamb describes an annual feast in May, a “solemn supper held in Smithfield, upon the yearly return of the fair of St. Bartholomew” [12]. It was held for chimney sweepers by a friend of Charles Lamb, James White, and Lamb participated and “ministered” to some tables at which children ate “hissing sausages”. White died in 1820 and therefore Lamb writes at the end that with the extinction of his friend “these suppers have long ceased...and the glory of Smithfield departed forever” [13]. Though at last we see the mostly passive and observing Lamb active at the end, the essay still ends in an unexpected sad tone, and offers not much hope or any solution to the chimney sweeper’s problems apart from the feast and the empathetic feeling one can have towards them.

IV. Images of Child Labour in Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Another literary piece, but more female perspective of child abuse and child labour is offered through Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a Victorian poet. Barrett Browning’s “The Cry of the Children”, published in 1843 in the *Blackwood’s Magazine*, was written after she had visited an urban factory and was shocked at the children’s pitiful state. The poem was read in the House of Lords and influenced legislation to protect working children. It is obvious that the poem is a personal response to the exploitation of children as cheap workers, especially in factories and mines, and a call to the society for reform. Within the poem Barrett Browning made use of repetitions and a plea to the reader is constantly present, as in lines such as “But the young, young

children, O my brothers, / They are weeping bitterly! - / They are weeping in the playtime of the others, / In the country of the free" [14]. This poem, even more than the essay discussed above, addresses and pleads with the reader directly, as if begging to cease the cruel practice on the spot. This urgency, apt imagery ("The young lambs are bleating") and emotional description of the children's "weeping" is the poet's strength trying to make even deaf ears hear the message. In the fourth stanza the speaker tells us about a young girl by the name of Alice, who "died last year" and the children try to hear her cry from her grave, but discovered "little Alice never cries", so the children reason that Alice must be happier there. The end of the stanza shows a shocking reality for the children, "It is good when it happens, 'say the children, / 'That we die before our time.'" This shows the maturity level of the children or the resignation to suffering and death as inevitable parts of their lives. "They are binding up their hearts away from breaking" and when someone invited them to "Sing out, children" in the fifth stanza, the children would respond, "Leave us quiet in the dark of the coal-shadows, / From your pleasures fair and fine!" [15]

The seventh stanza is the central stanza within the thirteen stanzas and is suggested to be the most significant one as it blends the workings of the machines in the factories with the function of the little children's bodies, and the first three lines are representative of the entire stanza:

'For, all day, the wheels are droning, turning , -
Their winds come in our faces, -
Till our hearts turn, - our head, with pulses burning...' [16]

Here the imagery is almost scary, in which the children's "hearts turn" and their heads "with pulses burn" are becoming one with the "droning" and "turning" of the wheels of the machines. It creates the impression as if the children and machines are interchangeably; the children become machines and the machines are more alive than the children. This impression of the unity of children workers and the machines, with which they work, is underlined through the poet's use of plosives like "t" and "p". The staccato-like rhythm of the poem, along with the repetitions of words like "turn" and "all" and the dashes at the end of many lines create a sensation of the noise in a factory, which indicate too that it is by this rhythm that the children live and not only work. On a broader view one can also say that the stanza also voices the sentiment and anxiety of the Victorian Age, as people felt that with the mechanization of work, people also lost their ability for kindness and emphatic feelings for others and became themselves more heartless.

The poem ends with the children's angels speaking for them, since no one else seems to do it, "'How long,' they say, 'how long, O cruel nation, / Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart" [17]? No one is exempt in the address of "O cruel nation" and it is the same we also need to hear today. No one can point the finger at only one person or group of people, we all are to blame if today child labour is found in our nation, which we call Mother Earth so ironically, if we neglect her children. The last two lines seem to have the purpose to haunt the reader.

But the child's sob curseth deeper in the silence
Than the strong man in his wrath! [18]

Barrett Browning with her skillful use of imagery, sound devices, repetitions, anaphora and caesura, along with the personal, emotional, haunting and colloquial style of the poem, in which all concerned 'parties', the children, adults, preachers and angels, get their share of dialogues, she is able to reach the heart of her readers and powerfully provokes a response in them.

V. Conclusion

The description of the pitiful condition of children in 18th and 19th century urban England, might remind one of many children on the streets of Mumbai and elsewhere in India, where child labour and exploitation of children are still existent. Both Lamb and Browning, in their own individual ways, give voice to the unheard cries of the children of their age and try to stir us, the reader today in Mumbai, to action or at least compassion. Being made aware of our responsibility towards the children of India in our own time, we too should ask ourselves and others with Elizabeth Barrett Browning - "Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart?"

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