

يمكن للمهمش التحدث بصراحة عن الألم: جماليات المعاناة في قصيدة "صرخة الأطفال"

لإليزابيث باريت براوننج

**"The Subaltern can speak out Pain": Aesthetics of Suffering in
Elizabeth Barrett Borrowing's "The Cry of the Children"**

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المخلص

تتناقش هذه الورقة كيف أن إليزابيث باريت براوننج في قصيدتها "صرخة الأطفال" تنتقد استغلال الأطفال في المناجم والمصانع من خلال توظيف شخصية شعرية مميزة. تتداخل هذه الشخصية بين صوتين: الصوت الأول، المتحدث المتعاطف والصوت الثاني، صوت الأطفال المعتدى عليهم أنفسهم. استخدمت الشاعرة هذه الشخصية بشكل فاعل من أجل إعطاء صوتاً للأطفال المستغلين الذين لا صوت لهم والتابعين من الناحية الجمالية، وقدمت الشاعرة صوتها كنفذ لاذع لهدم الاستغلال اللانساني لعمل الأطفال في المناجم والمصانع والظلم الاجتماعي في بريطانيا في العصر الفيكتوري.

Abstract

The present paper argues that Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her poem “The Cry of the Children” criticizes the exploitation of the children in mines and factories by employing a distinctive poetic persona. This persona is overlapped between the voice of an empathetic speaker and the voice of the abused children themselves. The poetess uses this persona effectively in order to give a voice to the exploited children who were voiceless and subaltern. Aesthetically, the poetess presented her voice as a harsh critique to subvert the dehumanized exploitation of child labor in mines and factories and social injustice in Britain in the Victorian period.

The Subaltern can speak out Pain. Aesthetics of Suffering in Elizabeth Barrett Borrowing's "The Cry of the Children"

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) was an English Victorian poetess. Her father, Edward was a merchant, decided to educate her at home. Barrett was a prematurely developed reader and writer, that's why she wrote her first collection of poems at the age of 12. She was also an avid reader of the classical literature such as the works of John Milton and William Shakespeare. Her collection *Poems* (1844) attracted the attention of the English poet Robert Browning. She eloped with him, and the couple moved to Italy. Elizabeth Barrett Browning became involved in Italian politics and later she composed her notable collection, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* in 1850. Among her best works are *The Seraphim and other poems*, *The Battle of Marathon*, *An Essay on Mind and Other Poems*, *Aurara Leigh* (a blank-verse novel/poem) and *Poems Before Congress*.

"The Cry of the Children" is a long poem that criticizes the terrible experiences of child labor in Britain during the Industrial Revolution. The poem starts with a rhetorical question to the readers if they can hear the agony of the children. The poetess depicts how little animals are free, enjoying their time, while these children are suffering and searching for relief. These kids are seen as prisoners, although they live in a free country. They express their sadness as well as they desire death. The poem attracts the readers' attention to the cruelty of exploiting children as workers in mines and factories. The poetess urges her readers to end the exploitation of child labor.

The word “Subaltern” comes from Latin. It consists of two parts: sub, which means below or under, and alter, which means the other or *alternus* (alternate). The combination of these two parts formed *subalternus*, which means subordinate. The term was first used in military which denotes to a rank below captain (Chosky). The Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was the first who broadens the usage of the term “Subaltern” and introduces it in sociopolitical field. It refers to people of low class and are controlled by another powerful class. It pigeonholes the individuals as inferior, marginalized, submissive and silenced. Gramsci coined the term “Subaltern” in his *Prison Notebook* while he was imprisoned by the Italian fascist regime led by Benito Mussolini. In fact Gramsci’s concern when he first coined the term was directed to the workers and peasants who were mistreated, exploited and abused harshly by the ruling class. The subaltern as a social class through history is misrepresented, neglected and lived on the margins of hegemonic policies of the ruling class and dictatorships who deprive this group from their essential rights. In this respect, Gramsci explains that, “The modern state abolishes many autonomies of the subaltern classes—it abolishes the state as a federation of classes—but certain forms of the internal life of the subaltern classes are reborn as parties, trade unions, cultural associations. The modern dictatorship abolishes these forms of class autonomy as well, and it tries hard to incorporate them into the activity of the state: in other words, the centralization of the whole life of the nation in the hands of the ruling class becomes frenetic and all-consuming” (VI, 25). Gramsci’s idea could be summarized in his proposal to create a class consciousness and unity for the workers in order to formulate counterpower. This counterpower is designed to

demand for the workers' basic rights, and be able to stop oppressing and exploiting them.(Gramsci VI,182-283).

Subaltern Studies as a branch in the academic sphere was also broadened in 1980s to a larger scale by third world scholars particularly in India. The Indian scholar Ranajit Guha expands the scope of the subaltern academic studies to include not just workers and peasants, but also submission in terms of "gender, age, caste and office (Guha 35). Therefore, Subaltern Studies appears at the beginning as historical and cultural studies, its notion has been elasticized to be applicable to any social class that is marginalized and muted. In this sense, Guha's aim was to give this class a voice to speak in order to rewrite its history and reformulate its representation which for centuries were written by the ruling class and its hegemonic discourses.

The Victorian era is the era during which Queen Victoria accessed to the throne (1837-1901). Britain in this period witnessed massive transformations in social, economic and historical spheres. Historically, Britain became a big empire and colonized large areas of the world. Socially, Britain was stable and there was an immense increase in population(Steinbach). Economically it was a time of huge growth and developments. These tremendous changes turned the face of Britain and became a big industrial power: it was shifted from agrarian to industrial. Britain was one of the countries that employed the new technological machines and inventions like, mass production, steam engines, sewing machines. Due to this massive change, this era witnessed also the vast propagation of modes of production, and the making of the factory system. This enormous change within the British society was also sustained the sense of nationalism, optimism and satisfaction about the promising and prosperous future of the empire. At the same time, these transformations have its blemishes interiorly:

the dehumanization of work conditions, exploitation of child labor, pollution, work involved long hours and low wages and urbanization are also noticed in this era. (Abrams 328-329).

The British society was divided into three stratifies in that era: the Upper class, Middle class, and lower class. The upper class consists of royals, lords, officers, while the middle class includes officials, merchants and investors. The lower class includes women and workers who were poor and deprived of education, healthcare and welfare. Within this class, there is a subclass which is called the underclass or the [underground]. Desolate and orphaned children, and inexperienced women who live on the donations of others are put in this stratify. These kids were mistreated, exploited and work under severe conditions in mines and factories. (<https://sites.udel.edu/britlitwiki/social-life-in-victorian-england/>).

Women in the Victorian period were confined to the traditional and stereotypical image they inherited in their society. Their main roles were restricted to familial life, and took care of their kids and husbands. The scope of women's education was also limited because it was generally believed that this sphere is especially and purely the world of men. Therefore, women in the Victorian era would learn only some skillful domestic activities like sewing, weaning, and cooking. Richard D. Altick explains that, "A woman was inferior to a man in all ways except the unique one that counted most to a man: her femininity. Her place was in the home, on a veritable pedestal if one could be afforded, and emphatically not in the world of affairs" (54). Women were seen as the "Other" a word with a negative connotation that denotes unfairly to their inferiority, passivity and incapability. The patriarchal society in the nineteenth century restrained women and defined her as a distorted

image of man and as a property owned by their peers. Simon de Beauvoir states that, “The situation of women is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures— nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the stance of the Other. They propose to stabilize her as object...The drama of women lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego)...and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential (11). The British poetess Elizabeth Barrett Browning refutes all these traditional biased perspectives in her poem” *The Cry of the Children*”. She redefines herself as an educated woman in the patriarch society.

The present paper argues that Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her poem “*The Cry of the Children*” criticizes the exploitation of the children in mines and factories by employing a distinctive poetic persona. This persona is overlapped between the voice of an empathetic speaker and the voice of the abused children themselves. The poetess uses this persona effectively in order to give a voice to the exploited children who were voiceless and subaltern. Aesthetically, the poetess presented her voice as a harsh critique to subvert the dehumanized exploitation of child labor in mines and factories and social injustice in Britain in the Victorian period.

Persona and voice are literary terms employed extensively in literary works. They reveal the inclination to consider the literary work as a “discourse”. Understanding a work as an utterance means that there is a definite speaker. This speaker utters his attitudes respecting the figures and issues tackled in his work and toward the audience to whom the work is addressed (Abrams 217). In this sense Persona is defined as, “the Latin word for the mask worn by actors in the classical theater... it is the first-person speaker who tells the story in a narrative poem or novel, or whose voice we hear in a lyric poem” (219). While, voice is,

“a [covert] voice beyond the fictitious voices that speak in a work, and a persona behind all the dramatic personae, and behind even the first-person narrator (219-220).

In “The Cry of the Children” Browning employs a unique poetic voice. Since she is a poetess in a patriarchal society, which belittles the latent capability of women and perceives them as subhuman, she realizes that her voice in this poem must be poignant and emotional. For this reason, Browning develops her voice throughout the whole poem by embodying the “Satellite”. It is critically significant to connect this “satellite identity” with the concept of subaltern. It anticipates also postcolonial view. The satellite identity is dependent, handicapped and fragile. It is usually constructed by the milieu and circumstances around it. In this sense, Julia Miele Roads clarifies that:

The satellite persona...construct[s] his/her personal identity around a central nexus of disability...[and] may include any one of the array of individuals who live in orbit around the disabled/celebrated body: family members, health care workers, service professionals, managers...translators and interpreters. This persona need not, however, necessarily occupy a directly assertive role: indeed, the satellite is often a variety of spectator seeking a more active role in connection with the disabled subject. The key is that the identity and/or the importance of the satellite be understood (by himself or by others) as residing (even temporarily) in his connection to the central “disabled” subject (93).

Browning aligns herself with the abused children in her poem. She realizes that the exploited children and women belong to the same repressed class, and both are silent and subservient. Thus, Browning in “The Cry of the Children” plays also the role of an agent. In fact, E Warwick Slinn defines agent as an attempt to “ Act and speak for

oneself, as an active subject...rather than a passive object...controlled or spoken by some other power” (43). Being an agent in a literary work is not the process of being a mediator or doing a specific mission instead of others. It is a complex operation that needs a skillful gift. In this respect, E. Warwick defines agency as, “ A Metaphor for double action, for always acting on behalf of another while acting as oneself” (44). Astutely Browning in her poem uses double unseparated poetic voice: one speaks about the suffering of the children in mines and factories, while the other is toggling with her personal identity as a poetess in the patriarchal society. In this sense Friedman clarifies that Barrett in her poems used to identify herself with the oppressed classes like abused children, slaves and women (208). Thus, she formulates her poetic voice creatively and prepares it in order to bring consciousness about the social injustice to a broader sense. In this sense, she gives a voice to the voiceless, the underground: the exploited kids and women.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning starts her poem inventively by quoting from Euripides’s tragedy *Medea*, “Pheu pheu, ti prosderkesthe m ommasin, tekna;’ [Alas, alas, why do you gaze at me with your eyes, my children.]”. The tragedy narrates the story of a woman who decides to take revenge upon her husband, who abandons her and marries another woman by slaughtering her two sons by her hands. She pronounces these words before committing her heinous crime knowingly. (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Euripides/The-plays#ref404883>). Metaphorically, the allusion to this tragedy is used intentionally to reveal the sense of torture and loss the subaltern mothers feel when they send their sons to work in mines and factories and they are certain that they are usually going to lose them sooner or later. The allusion to this horrific dramatic scene helps the poetess to transfer the sense of despondency to her readers. In addition, this effective quotation is interpreted also as an attempt by Browning to

create a calamitous admonition which proposes to arouse pity and empathy with the suffering of the underground children. Aesthetically, she keeps the quotation in Greek on purpose in order to deliver her castigation directly to the educated, bourgeois and ruling class who like and prefer the Greek literature. Actually, Browning was an avid reader to Greek literature. Her keen reading to Greek literature helps in forming her creative bold poetic consciousness (Falk 69).

Barrett Browning breaks the poetic rules of writing and the social conventions of the Victorian era early in the poem. She audaciously and directly addresses the patriarchal society and the ruling class in the first stanza, "**Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,**". She asks a rhetorical question to men to look at the children's working conditions and their suffering. In a society that is controlled and governed by men, she creates for herself a space. This space is found by Browning's self-will, not given by the patriarchal society. She puts herself in a position equal to men by calling them her brothers: she is rebellious and calling for intrinsic change in politics and society. In this respect, Helen Cooper explains that, "The woman's act of writing is a disobedience as profound as Prometheus's theft fire from the gods" (qtd in Falk 82). From the beginning till the end of her poem she aligns herself with her "brothers" and addressing them repeatedly in order to gain their attention, astound them and create effectual emotional response towards the underground and their suffering.

Powerful and imaginative imagery is formed efficaciously in the first stanza when the poetess portrays the children's deep grief. She conveys the image of weeping kids whose eyes are stuffed with bitter tears. These mourning and destitute kids can't also find tranquility and rest even in their mothers' bosoms: "**They are leaning their young heads against their mothers, / And that cannot stop their tears**" (3,4).

Tragically, these little kids look to their mothers to appease them, but their attempts are of no avail. Browning uses also natural images to give a minute sorrowful image about the suffering of these kids. The images of lambs, birds, fawns, flowers, and words like “bleating, chirping and playing,” denote to the celebration and the liveliness of the coming of the spring. Paradoxically these words and images contrast completely with the children’s state who are as Browning says, **“weeping in the playtime of the others”** (5-11). Barrett succeeds in her process of interweaving expressive contradictory imagery between the image of dejected and disconsolate childhood with the joys of animals and freshness of nature surrounding them. This unique artistic blending reveals Barrett’s outstanding poetic diction which in fact was purely romantic, especially Wordsworthian (Lewis 10; Fletcher 496). Added to that irony is employed in the second stanza expressively in order to bring the plight of social injustice about women to the surface. Again Browning asks her brother **“Do you ask them why they stand / Weeping sore before the bosoms of their mothers, / In our happy Fatherland?”** (23-4). The irony here is used to mirror and magnify the miserable image of the underground children in Britain. Furthermore, she deliberately changes British common expression of “Motherland” into a critical term of “Fatherland.” Perspicaciously she refers to the patriarchal society that governs Britain and keep silencing women. Browning intentionally makes the personal and the private is the public and political in order to lambast the ruling class and its repressive policies.

The poetess reveals the plight of the child labor by giving the reader a picturesque image. Browning atrociously portrays the children as individuals who are searching only for death to mitigate their pain and tribulation. This images is traumatic, **“Little Alice died last year her grave is shapen / Like a snowball, in the rime,” since it elucidates the misery of Alice’s life (39-40).** It might be understood that Alice’s life has no actual effect on the children. In fact, it has a great effect on the children because they wish they had the same luxurious life as Alice. But the children desire death in order to ease their suffering, **“It is good when it happens,’ say the children, /That we die before our time!’ / Alas, the wretched children! they are seeking / Death in life, as best to have!” (51-54).** The image of children desiring death is shocking and graphic and the language that the persona used in this image is expressive and powerful. By portraying the suffering of the children in such a ghastly image and powerful poetic language, Barrett provokes the readers to listen carefully, and responds sympathetically to the suffering of the abused children.

E.B. Browning depicts the egregiousness of the child labor in mines and factories artistically by vivid imagery. In this respect E.P. Thompson describes mines and factories where the poor children working as “places of sexual license, foul language, cruelty, violent accidents, and alien manners” (307). The children were working in onerous conditions and for a long time. Creatively, Browning depicts these terrible circumstances, **“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/”For all day, the wheels are droning, turning/Their wind comes in our faces/Till our hearts turn/ our heads, with pulses burning/And the walls turn in their places/Turns the sky in the high window blank and reeling**

/Turns the long light that droppeth down the wall/73-81). The exploitation of children by the owners of mines and factories was excessive and severe as Cody explains in his article, “Many children worked 16 hour days under atrocious conditions” (n.d.: par.2). Barrett creates visual efficient images about the shocking environment of child labor. The images of the wheels of the new developed machines in industrial Britain which are moving constantly requires children who are forced to work incessantly. The polluted wind and the unstoppable machines form the appalling daily scene of the children inside the mines and factories. Due to these macabre environment the locus is like a prison, thus, the children cannot see the sky from inside. Browning portrays these mines and factories as an infernal region which suffocates and restricts the children. Working in such locations under these horrific circumstances, with machines wheeling persistently is disastrous for the children. Browning rebukes the inhuman exploitation of kids and the atrocious condition they put in. She changes the children’s position from being submissive and marginalized into an object whose voice is directed to narrate their own bitter experiences painfully and precisely.

Boldly and aesthetically Browning reprimands the religious community. One of the tragic result of the industrial revolution in Great Britain is the labor children who have no idea about God. She criticizes the duplicity and insincerity of the preachers since they neglect deliberately the suffering of the children and do nothing to end their exploitation. They simonize Christian teachings to the lower class, and do nothing to ease their suffering. **“Now tell the poor young children, / O my brothers, / To look up to Him and pray -- / So the blessed One, who blesseth all the others, / Will bless them another day”** (100-104). Barrett Browning’s voice in these lines is exasperating. She broadens her scope of critique and include religious men. She

criticizes their role which confines only on teaching the children to ask God to bless them. Shockingly unacceptable is the reply to the children's appeal that God might bless them another time. Browning urges the church and the religious circle to do their duty and stop dehumanizing the children in mines and factories. More to the point, Barrett blames the failure of the church's reaction towards the exploitation of the children. The children as a result of their mistreatment and abuse in these factories grow skeptical towards God, **"He is speechless as a stone; / And they tell us, of His image is the master / Who commands us to work on"** (126-128). The image in these lines portrayed about God comes in sharp contrast to the Biblical image about God as a provider of tranquility and relief. Vociferously Browning castigates the silence of the religious community by exposing the children's skeptical views about God and the church which did nothing to end their plight and suffering.

Curiously enough, Barrett Browning employs the voice of the satellite masterly. The voice at the end of poem is given to the "Underground": **"How long,' they say, 'how long, O cruel nation, / Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart, -- / Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation, / And tread onward to your throne amid the mart?"** (153-156). The voice here has two functions: the first one is an unequivocal scream which demands help to end the exploitation of the children. The second one is proposed to produce consciousness about the inequities and creates a sense of liability to stop repressing the underground: children and women. Moreover, intrepidly Browning addresses her country as a **"Cruel Nation"** Barrett Browning was shocked by the terrible and disgusting facts discovered in The Children's Employment Commission testimonies and statements. The report issued by this committee discovered that mines and factories in

Britain used to employ little kids whose age between six to twelve. Also the report exposed that many of these children passed away, while others turned handicapped due to the terrible working conditions in these mines and factories (Morley 224-225). Browning discovers that the main reason behind the exploitation of the children in mines and factories is money. In this sense Hugh D Hindman clarifies that, "Several factors explain this heavy reliance on children and adolescents. As the pioneers in industrialization, and facing substantial investments in novel technologies, many British factory owners were desperately eager to cut labor costs in order to maximize return on equipment. Children's wages, far lower than those of adults, seemed particularly attractive (39). Browning denounces the avarice and negligence of the owners of mines and factories who become wealthy by exploiting the children brutally and viciously.

In the last four lines of the poem, Browning ends her poetic voice creatively. Her creative voice reverberates resoundingly which is formed to arouse pity and sympathy in her readers towards the suffering and exploitation of children. Aesthetically, in these lines Browning suggests that the children who are powerless and submissive are given power. This power is taken from their masters and is given to them, **"Our blood splashes upward, O our tyrants,/ And your purple shews your path ;/ But the child's sob curseth deeper in the silence/ Than the strong man in his wrath!"**(157-160). Added to that, the owners of mines and factories and the bourgeoisies are called "tyrants," a word with a very negative connotation that reveals their mercilessness and cruelty. Whereas the cries of the abused and exploited kids are depicted as more powerful than the fury and greed of their employers. In fact, the reason behind giving the children's tears and weeps a latent power could be interpreted as Browning's plot to

incite her readers and stimulate them to take an actual positive response concerning the child labor.

In conclusion Elizabeth Barrett Browning employs her gift to change. She uses her poetry as powerful weapon to castigate the exploitation of children in mines and factories and the misrepresentation of women. She does understand the urgent need for poetry in the process of the social reform. Thus, as a poetess in the patriarchal society she realizes that she could do a change in the sociopolitical sphere throughout her bold poetic voice that gives a grand space to the marginalized and voiceless to speak.

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