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Browning's Poetics of Necropolitical Power Dynamics

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Abstract

This article explores the life-scaring power dynamics in Browning's poetry regarding the social praxis of gender as staged by Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess." To this end, it peruses these poems to show the poetic necropolitics; politics of death. Delving into the poems, the male chauvinist narrators hold the bodies of their female counterparts before annihilating them. Taking stock of necropolitical power wielded by the sovereign narrators, this paper aims to parse the deadening lives of the perpetrated Duchess and Porphyria. For this purpose, it deploys Achille Mbembe's understanding of necropolitics as a critical insight that he imbibes from Michel Foucault's biopolitical racism (that holds the authority to deploy alterity and expose life to death). Meanwhile, the study does not only expand the necropolitical literary explication of Browning's poems, nonetheless, it attempts to reorient the readers to reexamine the alibi of the killers in the poems. Enthused by Mbembe's acumen that revisits how power makes its subjects docile through political decisionism: "who must live and who must die," this paper debates the sexist discourse of the killer-narrators and the living-dead ladies before their killing. Largely, it wonders to know how the subjects turn out to be the living dead or the object of

male sadism. To elucidate this life-scaring politics; necropolitics, this paper also probes the presence (hegemonic existence) of sexist males that renders the female absent (non-existence) before they are immolated in the poems. It concludes that sexist patriarchy replicating the sovereign power constitutes the precarious life of the females via making them abject and invisible through 'corpsing-policy' which becomes a pertinent issue to rear humanism in Humanity Studies.

Keywords: necropolitics, power, sexist, precarious, living-dead

Introduction

The Greeks had two lexicons to denote death: *thanatos* and *necro*. Achille Mbembe, a postcolonial critic from Cameroon, deploys necropolitics to denote the politics of death over life. Though Mbembe's understanding of necropolitics builds idea on Michel Foucault's politics of life: biopolitics, it debunks Foucault's life-nurturing biopolitics. Biopolitics is the socio-political practice to regulate and manage population's quality and quantity of life. In so doing, it exploits disciplinary power (to regulate physio-psychology of the people) to draw pliant bodies and biopower (power's hold over life) to manage the demographic features of the mass of people. While parsing the discriminatory colonial politics, largely having faded up with its 'policy of corpsing' over the colonized natives, Mbembe builds up the concept of necropolitics that refers to the politics of violence, and ostracism that renders the natives 'walking-dead' beings. In short, his necropolitical notion critiques the political decisionism of who to exist and who to extinct which means the political dictation of differentiating the values of life in society concerning the political nepotism. Taking stock of the necropolitical concept, this article explores Robert Browning's two dramatic monologues, "Porphyria's Lover" and "My Last Duchess" to examine Porphyria and the Duchess 'lives under erasure' respectively which complies with Mbembe's conceptualization of necropolitics. The former poem chronicles male/female binary that replicates the juxtaposition of colonizer and the colonized. Delving into the gender binary in the poem, the study inquires how the chauvinist male narrator mistreats Porphyria and finally, strangulates her. In tandem with this, "My Last Duchess" also invokes the objectification of the Duchess's beauty and her sabotage when she prefers a democratic and simple lifestyle that does not comply with the codes of feudal patriarchy. Grounded on male hegemony-led female ostracism, the study interrogates the culturally inherent ruling power of male narrators and the deprivation of the females who are subdued and physically absent thoroughly. Enthused by the power-dynamics regarding man/ woman relationships, the study attempts to answer the following issues: Why are Porphyria and the Duchess subdued and finally killed despite their servility? And, in what ways, do the male sovereign narrators enjoy the impunity even after killing the females that resurfaces necropolitics: exposing life to death in the poems? Also, the study postulates that male narrators in Browning's poems like the sovereign colonizers exert the necropower and receive impunity through its normalization.

As these poems replicate the Victorian society surfacing male bullying and its corollary of female marginalization, many literary scholars have critiqued them. Blogger,

Diyana Ayuni explores Victorian womanhood in Browning's poem. She remarks "the portrayal of the duchess as a reflection of women conforming to the ideals of womanhood during Victorian era where they are amiable to the society as well as being innocent" (n. pag.). Ayuni underpins the docile women who amicably tune with Victorian codes set by patriarchy. She sheds light on the conditioned lives of the women which Spivak terms as 'patriarchal worlding.' In like manner, Sabina Alia digs out abnormality in "Porphyria's lover." She claims "it describes all the abnormal activities of an insane lover who tries to win his beloved forever by strangling her with her hair" (45). Alia also unveils the necromancy and corpsing the female. She critiques the abnormal psychology of the male who strangles Porphyria. With this, as Renée Fox also examines these poems as a poetics of great "crudity" and "jolting violence" (463). Fox digs out the raw and wild nature of the narrators who harvest 'violence' in the poems. By the same token, Adam Roberts reads the dramatic monologue as "a form of verbal resuscitation of the dead, a quasi-Spiritualist voicing of dead men and women" (109). What Roberts brings fore is the story of the crimes committed in the past. He appreciates Browning's dexterous skill in narrating the historical crime testimonies through 'verbal resuscitation' that adds poetic flavor. Along with this, D. R. John also links "this murder with the code of honour of dukedom by which, the duke may have feared a disgrace to the family honour at the hands of the duchess" (133). Pointing to honour killing as the privilege of the male in the then European society, John acclaims Browning's critique of gender-based disparity.

The critics above pointedly stage the injustice against females and their subjugation as a strategic tool for existence. To recap, they situate Browning's portrayal of Victorian patriarchal society where sexist males consider themselves superior to women. Against these backdrops of critical interpretations, this study assays the females' petrified lives and their suffocation before their killing as a necropolitical power dynamic. However, their killings index the sovereign male impunity. Put differently, the rendering of the subdued women and their killing as well as the discourses of justifying the killing evoke the constitution of power-led truth and its social dissemination. This power dynamics of sexist males and their brutality thoroughly comply with Mbembe's notion of necropolitics. Based on the socio-political marginalization of females and their voiceless plight as well as sabotages, the concept of necropolitics envisioned by Mbembe helps the study interrogate the exertion of males' hegemonic power. More precisely, the exploration and examination of the subjugation and smothering of the female characters under impunity signify Browning's critique of necropolitical poetics that the study aims to analyze within the orbit of Mbembe's necropolitical insight.

Method and Methodology of the Study

The study dives into the trajectory of qualitative research. To interpret the poems, it offers a close reading—the reading between the lines—of the selected poems by Browning. Meanwhile, it identifies, explores, and examines the necropolitical power dynamics to assay the exertion of masculine power that can take and spare the lives of the females in the poems. After critically analyzing the poems in the purview of Mbembe's necropolitical

understanding, it judges and concludes that the bullying of sadist male narrators results in deadening the females' lives under the use of necropower. It means, the narrators withholding sovereignty retain the subjects under fear with the motif of starving and immolation that recounts necropolitics. With this, the study takes stock of necropolitical insight envisioned by Mbembe which he draws while parsing the colonizers' (here, the chauvinist males) brutality over the colonized (subjugated females) natives. In sum, his insight becomes a pertinent tool to examine and analyse the lives of the dispossessed people suffering from any socio-political injustice worldwide.

Induced by the male narrators' absolute power over the females and their living dead lives before they get annihilated, this study befits Mbembe's *magnum opus*, *Necropolitics* (2019) to analyse and examine gender-based atrocity. Mbembe's notion of necropolitics; the politics of death that explains the political decisionism: 'who to live and who to die' as it turns people to the living-dead. It stages the violence caused by modern democracy from which there is no escape (6). He details how the regime (One who holds absolute power and can outlaws others) deploys structural violence, surveillance, and exclusionary policies that ever expose people to death. To put it otherwise, necropolitics delves into the differential values of life that sovereignty decides under war, colonialism, racism and other forms of social discriminatory practices. In particular, drawing on Foucauldian biopolitical racism that classifies, hierarchizes, and even eliminates some people to safeguard the regime, Mbembe assays the discrepancy of the sovereign while consigning the differential value over the lives of citizens. If Foucault's biopolitics yields social engineering of populations through discursive practices that includes both 'ideological state apparatus' and 'repressive state apparatus' to govern them, necropolitics harvest 'a society of terror, oppression, starvation and immolation' under the normalized state of exception which Western democracy endorses. In other words, he alludes to "the capacity of the sovereign to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" (80). His assertion sharply points out the exit from the high claim of democracy when there is the harvest of society of enmity through terror and counter-terror. Precisely, these modern Western practices retain life under terror and render the death world. While critiquing the colonizers' practice of deadening the natives, Mbembe spotlights the discriminatory power exercise of the regime regarding its citizens which pushes a large number of the population to live in the buffer zone between life and death mostly inclined to the latter. He remarks, "The sovereignty consists in the power to manufacture an entire crowd of people who specifically live at the edge of life, or even on its outer edge— people for whom living means continually standing up to death" (37). Here, Mbembe tactfully stages the latent motif of the regime to expose the lives of people to death through the elongated state of exception.

In a book review, Patrick Dwyer sums up "Mbembe's work on necropolitics demonstrates how contemporary societies have exited democracy, renewing the camp and other colonial practices to create death worlds and a society of separation. Necropolitics makes an important contribution to outlining the conditions of hatred and separation that

constitute contemporary death worlds" (550). Dwyer traces the underside of Western democracy—the death world as the constitutive part of Mbembe's *Necropolitics*. Mbembe's understanding of necropolitics does not explicitly foreground gender-based violence, however, this study appropriates it because it offers insight to denounce the killing and forging of the living-dead life and legalized killing of females in Browning's poetry. Also, Browning's selected poems account and critique the death world as the patriarchal constitutive wherein the females have to hold the living dead lives before they are immolated.

Textual Analysis: Necromantic Poetics

Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" begins with a macabre setting that suggests the projection of death world in which Porphyria lives a walking dead life. "The rain" (line 1), "the sullen wind" (line 2) and "tore the elm-tops down" (line 3) are the retinal imageries that substantiate the trajectory of the *necro* world in which Porphyria enters. The projection of nature's crudity represents the cruelty germinated in the mind of the narrator which suggests the pathetic fallacy: nature's compatibility with the narrator's mood in the poem. Because the outside horrific natural vagaries replicate the semiotic murderous design of the narrator. In a way, this gothic setting details the devilish plot of the narrator. The projection of the disturbing natural activities becomes the exact prognosis of the disturbed mind of the narrator which Rodica Sylvia Stan reiterates as "the violence which he projects onto the natural world carries a social as well as sexual charge" (113). Stan underpins the congruity of violent nature and the menacing desire of the narrator. Drenched with rain: "dripping cloak" (line 11), "damp hair" (line 13) at night amid the hostile windy rain, passionate Porphyria comes for dating that violates the etiquette of her elite society. This indicates the hurdle she is coping with to run her love affairs with the narrator turns out to be her entering into the *necro* world. Meanwhile the description of "tonight" (line 1) leads to the archetypal sense of death or the dark desire that the narrator rears. With these, the study argues that from the onset of the poem there is death-ruled ambience that also enthused the narrator to manipulate and end the life of docile Porphyria.

Further, the poet accounts the self-annihilating love and complete devotion of Porphyria: "She was come through wind and rain" (line 30) refers to the social constraint for her to be the "gay feast" (line 26) inferring the prey of the male narrator. Also, "Porphyria worshipped me" (line 33) and "she was mine, mine" index the fact that the narrator is the supreme Sovereign and her servile life under the hegemony of patriarchy. In this context, Simon de Beauvoir also scans the secondary status of female since biblical times (woman is out of the ribs of man) which Monique Witig's recaps as 'One is not born a woman' that underpins the socially constituted subjectivity of the female and their bodies as sites of male's political motif. In particular, the servile womanhood depicted in the poem replicates Victorian code that Diyana Ayuni's also marks as Porphyria's docile life (n. p.). In short, Ayuni discusses the petrified life of Porphyria.

No sooner has he had his voyeur on her beauty than the imposter narrator intends to possess her. So, he pretends as if he is making love with her: "made my cheek lie there"

(line 19) and "... her cheeks once more/ Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss" (lines 48-49). In the state of kissing her, he winds her hair thrice around her neck and strangles her and yet claims that it is a euthanasia in which she never feels pain: "... no pain she felt/ I am quite sure she felt no pain" (lines 41-42). Using diacope; a rhetorical device in poetry in which there is intermittent recurring use of same word/s, the sadist narrator proudly reveals the crime he has committed. He proclaims that by seizing the romantic moment, he immortalises her love. He nevertheless, he does not admit that he committed homicide. Let's have a perusal of the narrative from the horse's mouth:

In one long yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around
And strangled her. No pain felt she. (lines 39-41)

In these poetic lines, the narrator recalls how he murdered her. They also outline her passivity while being his victim. Prior to be killed, she is absent or a walking-dead figure whose voice no reader gets a chance to listen. Ironically, he mentions that she felt no pain because he kills her. Therefore, her passivity and docility signify her abject life which finally the narrator terminates, and yet he does not regret. Instead of confessing the crime, the narrator reasons that his murderous act has been consented by god: "And yet God has not said a word" (line 60) which draws on his righteous job of murdering her because through killing he saves her platonic love which can go impure later.

Put differently, he equates himself with Sovereign god to hold right over Porphyria's life. Building idea on this, Michael L. Burduck parses the nocturnal arrival of Porphyria to meet with the narrator as a design to seduce him and she enacts as the vampire. Therefore, his killing seems to be safeguarding him, not a crime as the European colonizers would claim that the killing of the natives is on grounds of their self-defence. With this logic of protecting the self, Burduck argues that his killing of Porphyria is to save her from hell's voracious minions (64). Hooking the concept of vanguardism of the narrator who saves Porphyria from being subject to the trap of passion and lust that could lead her to hell, the narrator signifies his crime which is possible in a state of exception.

While pondering over the retrospective memoir of the narrator, Adam Roberts a Victorian reviewer underpins in Browning's dramatic monologues "the secret of the transmigration of the soul in dramatic monologues in which the dead come to life in turn call our attention to the limits of the poet's reanimating power by exposing the inherent subjectivity of any resuscitative poetic project" (116). Indeed, Browning's villain narrator does not commit a crime at the moment of speaking but rather, he recalls the past crime. It means that he intends to show his privileged state of life that is beyond legal injunction; impunity. Roberts also focuses on the verbal resuscitation of Browning's poetic genius. With this, pointing to the disturbed mind of the narrator David Eggenchwiler claims "In "Porphyria's Lover" the speaker is undoubtedly mad" (40). Eggenchwiler does not accept the logic forwarded by the narrator after he killed Porphyria, however, the inference can be that bullying against females was the normalized state of exception in which the killer has no injunction, or, rather he enjoys the privilege of impunity. Therefore, Renée Fox

comments on the “necromantic act” (465) that raises the voice of the dead. By and by, C. R. Tracy also does not agree that the confession made by the narrator is out of repentance. Rather, it shows the impunity that the colonizers used to get against the locals as detailed by Mbembe in *Necropolitics*.

To examine “My Last Duchess” there is also the gothic setting. The painting of the duchess has been hung on the wall after her assassination. Whereas the murder occurs in “Porphyria’s Lover” almost in the denouement part of the poem, in “My Last Duchess” murder is committed in the beginning; “That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall/ Looking as if she were alive” (lines 1-2). The word ‘last’ denotes the previous one which means no more in the present. From the same vantage point, the phrase ‘were alive’ also explores alive in the past inferring death at the moment. These poetic lines invoke necropolitics in which the Sovereign Duke holds the possessive right over the Duchess’s life. It also invokes the ancient Roman practice of the patriarch’s authority to eliminate his (defiant) family members without incurring homicide which Michel Foucault terms as “*patria potestas*” (Will 135); the head of the family holds authority over the life of the family members and the slaves. Exerting the power of *patria potestas*, the Duke succeeds in depriving, suffocating and killing the Duchess. Nonetheless, hanging the painting on the wall after he makes her die.

Loneliness kills an individual and s/he becomes a living-dead if made alienated. Alienating the Duchess from the community epitomizes the spillover effect of the power dynamics of the Duke before he makes/ lets her die. She rarely gets the company let alone a hermit which the following poetic verse reinforces; “Fra Pandolf” (line 3), the narrator adds, paints her painting “busily a day” (line 4). Making her absent from public spaces shows her socio-political death. This substantiates the Duke has unofficially incarcerated the Duchess by preventing her from meeting with others. It also underpins the fact that alienating her invokes the duchess’s socio-political death. The painting under the curtain in his private gallery where nobody is permitted also substantiates the fact that even after making her a corpse, he holds the authority over the painting that nobody can eavesdrop save himself. The following extract unveils his all-encompassing power over her; “But to myself they turned (since none puts by/ The curtain I have drawn for you, but I) / And seemed as they would ask me, If they durst” (lines 9-11). The poetic extract accounts for the megalomania of the misogynist Duke who exploits total power over the Duchess even after her death. It infers his hegemony over her and the way he normalizes it in social practice through ostracism. As a curator of the gallery, he protects the portrait not as a sweet conjugal relic, however, as an aesthetic object of art that spotlights his connoisseurship in artifacts which is tamable and under possession. More specifically, according to Fox “My Last Duchess” hyperbolically becomes a memoir performance of violence that forcibly reconstructs the subjectivity of her silenced body (475) perhaps dead that witnesses the necropower consigned to the Duke.

Her simplicity and ignorance in feudal culture turn out to be her *hamartia* which the Duke recounts in the poem as; “. . . she liked/ Whatever she looked on, and her looks went

everywhere" (lines 23-24). Here, pointing to her naivety he questions her egalitarian nature when she shares her "spot of joy" (lines 14-15): perhaps the dimpled smiles with the gardener and the mule or whoever she meets with that does not comply with his family culture, i.e. feudal culture. In tandem with his ego problem, Michael G. Miller reveals the Duke's enormous ego that ultimately terminates the docile Duchess's life. Miller remarks "All in all, the Duke's account of the presence of the spot of joy in the portrait does not condemn his Duchess to a moral position tending to excuse his actions towards her, but instead reinforces the poem's greatest achievement. The delineation of an ego sustained by use of language both subtle and audacious" (33). Also, her naïve trifling leaves an indelible psychological trauma. He informs the readers further: ". . . she ranked/ My gift of the nine hundred years old-name/With anybody's gift . . ." (lines 32-34). The Duke finds her simplicity and egalitarian nature one of the inexcusable crimes which hurts his male chauvinist ego. Exploring this, Stanton Millet argues that the Duke's "sexual jealousy and fierce, even psychotic possessiveness may well be his fundamental motivation, but his primary conscious motive is to explain the contrast between the portrait and the living model" (25). Millet too delves into the power dynamic of the society in which the sovereign male holds authority over the life of the Duchess. Consequently, he commands her life and she dies. The narrator unveils it:

Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
 Much the same smile? This grew; and I gave commands;
 Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
 As if alive . . . (lines 45-47).

This extract accounts the real necropoetics of Browning because it talks of the killing of the Duchess to appease the ego-hurt Duke who loves terminating her life on the ground of trifle reason. Remapping "the dead Duchess, stripped of all subjectivity," Fox adds, "who embodies the culmination of Duke's desire for control, a climactic moment, discrete and frozen" (474). Implicitly, her alive as well as dead body anchors the necropolitics; politics of death over the life of the Duchess that always remained under the Duke's sovereign decisionism: whether or not she is to live. It means she is living under his absolute power that can spare her life as well as sabotage her.

Further, the Duke shows the painting in bronze to the marriage emissary. This ekphrastic description also solidifies the trajectory of *necro* world that delineates the misery of the petrified life of the horse tamed by Neptune, the Sea God. The ensuing verse implies that "Neptune, though, / Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity, /Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me" (lines 54-56) the coercive power under the disposal of the Duke who retains anybody under his disciplinary codes irrespective the ignorance and humbleness of the recipient. By and by, these *ekphrasis* (verbal presentation of the visual works of art) narratives implicitly invoke the *necro* ambience in the poem through which Browning critiques the hegemonic power of the Duke and the impoverished life of the Duchess.

Conclusion: Life under Erasure

By rendering Porphyria and the Duchess passive receivers of male atrocity, Browning not only chronicles the social reality of subjugating the females but also critiques the sexist bullying over their lives. Also, by exploring the absent voices of the victims under the normalized social praxis, Browning spotlights the exceptional hegemony of patriarchy resulting in the alterity of the female. He implicitly intends to start the cult of social respect for female against the capitalist ramification of their bodies. In sum, Browning ridicules the reasons forwarded by the narrator to exterminate Porphyria and the Duchess. He notably debates the impunity of the killer in the poems. His exploration of the use of necropolitical power over the subdued women in the poems helps to examine gender-based power dynamics. It also shows the superiority of masculinity over females and the latter's physical absence. Consequently, it finds the female voices absent in the patriarchal 'worlding.' After subjugating the women, the chauvinist narrators, wield their necropower to seize Porphyria and Duchess's lives since these ladies are already outlawed whose homicide does not come under legal parlance. By delineating their subjugation and annihilation, Browning also generates a poetic debate on the man/woman relation and the trajectory of the power structure. In so doing, he likes to resurrect humanism amid the growing violence against women folks.

Finally, Browning necropolitical poems have enlisted the shreds of evidence to explore, examine and assay the social reality regarding gender violence and the exemption of the perpetrator which affords Mbembe's critique of colonial ostracism in *Necropolitics*. By reorienting the scholars to rethink the male's use of necropolitical power over females resulting in their outlawry and deaths, Browning opens an academic debate on the impunity of males that also solidifies and remaps the gendered-based injustice of modern society. In the end, the confessional narratives of the male narrators on rendering the living-dead lives and corpses of the females themselves shed light on the need to revisit the exertion of necropolitical power. With this, Browning's staging of the females' petrified lives and their killings under impunity critiques the uneven social relation between males and females. Therefore, it undeniably critiques the male narrators' exertion of necropower that ultimately subdues Porphyria and the Duchess.

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