



Shelley: A Marxist before Karl Marx

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore Shelley's poetry as a reflection of Marxist notion of resistance, highlighting how his poetry replicates the concerns of the oppressed and the disquiets of the working class. Repositioning Shelley's works considering Marxist poetics, the paper argues that both Shelley and Marx bring to the fore anxieties and sufferings of the marginalized common folks, presenting both familiar and diverse patterns of resistance against the hegemonies of their own times. Focusing on the Shelley's select poetry, the paper posits Marxist perspective of struggle for the rights of the deprived working class.

Keywords: Marxist Poetics, resistance, working class, Shelley's poetry

Introduction

Through-out the Nineteenth century, economic deprivation was one of the major challenges faced by the working class in the otherwise thriving era of Industrialization which was the central pre-occupation of the age. The groundbreaking inventions radically transformed lives of people; however, deplorable working conditions in factories and workplaces escalated the miseries of the working class, resulting in numerous up-risings in various parts of Europe. Among the thinkers and reformers who became the expounders of these exploited people are Shelley and Marx more prominent, who in their respective ages became the voices of these suppressed classes. Although Shelley lived earlier than Marx, they conform when it comes to pleading the cause of working class. In the 1840s, Engels noticed, "Shelley had been almost exclusively the property of the working class. The Chartists had read him for what he was a tough agitator and revolutionary" (qtd in Foot 210). Shelley voiced his feelings through poetry while Marx materialized his ideas into an organized philosophy. The scientifically explained economic ideas of Marx, a child of enlightenment, illustrate a direction to the working class to fight against the exigencies; more importantly, these ideas turned out to be precepts for the society in general.

Shelley might not have been familiar with terms like bourgeoisies, proletariat, or alienation, coined later by Marx and who gave scientific and organized shape to these terms; however, he



took upon himself the responsibility of political and economic uplift of the deprived class. Shelley knew that the “oppressors would feel their impotence and reluctantly and imperfectly concede some limited portions of the rights of people” (632), however, if this does not happen then, “The last resort of resistance is undoubtedly insurrection” (Shelley 633). Like Shelley, Marx believes that revolution is an appropriate answer to the miseries of the working class; considering “overthrow of all existing human condition” (58) is the inevitable phenomenon for human progression. Along with being the supporter of revolution, Marx conceives an economic system which gets implemented in societies that intend to redress the working condition and life of the working class. Moreover, both Shelley and Marx attack tyranny and stand against the oppressors in the front. If on the one hand, Shelley sings of liberty; on the other hand, Marx demonstrates to the world how to get rid of the shackles of slavery, monarchy, and capitalism.

Literature Review

Karl Marx’s daughter Eleanor Marx and his son in law Edward claimed in a seminar that Marx was a great admirer of Shelley and loved reading the poetry of Shelley. They remarked further that if Shelley had lived later than Marx, he would have been a true follower of Marx. Edward and Eleanor sum up their claim of Shelley as a socialist in their words, “The possessor can and does dictate terms to the person of that non-possessing class. This was the teaching of Shelley. This is the teaching of Socialism, and therefore the teaching of Socialism, whether it is right or wrong, is also that of Shelley. We claim him as a Socialist” (Shelley and Socialism). Marx believed Shelley to be a revolutionary and would always been a true guard of socialism. Edward and Eleanor believe that “The Mask of Anarchy,” Shelley’s famous politically driven poem, mentioned several political figures which was not merely an attack on personalities, a revolutionary act in itself; therefore, it was Shelley’s dislike for the monarchy that made him hate Prince Rageant who embodied princship and Lord Castlereagh who represented power and authority (Shelley and Socialism).

Bruce Woodcock claims that Shelley criticizes the modern man’s greed for accumulating wealth at the cost of exploitation of the poor. He knows that working class is the real contributors of social economy. In his poem “Queen Mab” (1812), he “attacked commerce, capitalism, and money backed up by an extraordinary note identifying human labour as the source of all wealth”



(Woodcock XI11). According to him, Shelley advocates a revolution against the exploitation of labors. However, Shelley suggests that there is a need for an inner as well as an outer revolution and that revolution as a process should embody its own ideals through the way it enacts itself, a theme which recalls the idealistic selfishness and compassion as advocated in *Laon and Cynthia*. (Woodcock XVII). Moreover, Shelley believes that “revolution must be enacted in accordance with the social vision that the revolutionary aspires to, if they are to avoid the bloody excesses which destroyed the French revolution and at the same time, Shelley interrogates the limits of such idealism” (Woodcock XX).

A famous Marxist critic, Paul Foot contends that for Shelley, nationalism and jingoism are like abomination; therefore, he is against colonial conquest of England, especially in Ireland. Hence it is evident that throughout his life he was a republican and anti-militarist. Another commonality, according to Foot, we could find in Shelley and Marx is their approach towards religion. Shelley was against Christianity from the beginning as he considers religion, ‘the halter of superstition’ (56), which make it the most horrible crime of established religion. Similarly, Karl Marx also believes that religion is like opium which serves as a prop for tyranny. Foot argues that Shelley hates poverty more than anything else, portraying a gory image of poverty in his poem, ‘Rosalind and Helen’ (1817). That is why Shelley proclaims vociferously in an early poem that he is the “friend of the unfriended poor” (67). He is caught up in the angry tirade or idealistic vision. Interestingly, Foot reaches to the conclusion that Shelley is not a socialist in the broader sense of the term; he calls Shelley a, leveler.

Kenneth Neill Cameron claims that Marx believed Shelley to be a revolutionary and a socialist for his “sense of identification with the working people of town and country and not just with bourgeois anti- feudal sentiments” which clearly manifests his “understanding of the exploitation of labor” (Cameron 234). Shelley, then, “anticipated the outlook of Marx and Engels in several ways. He perceived the existence of classes and the class struggle, the value-producing role of labor and its exploitation, the special oppression of women, the repressive function of the State, and the evolution of the world into a classless society” (Cameron 236).

Main Argument



The argument then gets a validation in the fact that Shelley just like Marx is widely known as die hard social activist and radical agitator in his youth; both are uneasy souls opposing the established institutions: religious, political, and social. They also possess a knack for sloganeering. It may not be exaggeration to argue that Shelley, in his poetry contends the socio-political and revolutionary ideas which later became the main subject of Karl Marx philosophy. (Cameron 236). Moreover, there is much in common between the two writers with respect to themes that discuss class exploitation, miseries of industrial workers, socialist point of view and the opposition to aristocratic and the ruling class. For example, in his poem, ‘Song to the Men of England,’ (1819), Shelley shows his disdain against the exploitation of labour and expropriation of the fruits of labour:

Men of England, wherefore plough
 For the lords who lay ye low?
 Wherefore weave with toil and care
 The rich robes your tyrants wear? (405)

The poem “Song to the Men of England” is designed to appeal the less educated section of English society: the workers and the people who fed the wealth of the tyrant. Likewise, Shelley’s sense of social justice is impersonated through the men of England by which he means the working class in the factories and the peasants working in the fields. He compares the owners of factories to drones which make no efforts and are dependent on others:

Wherefore feed, clothe, and save
 From the cradle to the grave
 Those ungrateful drones who would
 Drain your sweat—nay, drink your blood? (405)

Similarly in another poem “Queen Mab” Shelley has used the same symbol of ‘drones’ which live the lives of parasites. He addresses them:

Whence thinkest thou, kings and parasites arose?
 Whence that unnatural line of drones, who heap
 Toil and unvanquishable penury
 On those who build their palaces, and bring



Their daily bread? From vice, black and loathsome vice (21)

Shelley believed that it was due to these blood-suckers that the working condition in England was deplorable even when it became the Industrial power-house of Europe. That the, “majority [of] the people of England are destitute and miserable, ill-clothed, ill-fed, ill-educated”. (Shelley 615). It was anticipated that the common Briton would get benefit of the economic growth; however, the reality was different. The Industrial labour was not receiving benefit of this economic activity as a result the labour was getting estranged from the products they produced. Consequently, the farmers who left their villages to work in the cities were disappointed. This deprivation and distancing of the labour from their product give birth to uncertainty and sense of insecurity to the working class. Shelley lamented that the labors do not get the reward of their challenging work and are kept at bay from their achievements. Later Marx coins the term ‘Alienation’ for such a phenomenon, expostulating four types of alienation. Karl Marx identified four types of alienation.

1. From Products of own Labor,
2. From the Process of Production
3. From Species-being
4. From another Person (Shah 49)

In the light of this concept of alienation, Shelley believes that the poor workers who produce the product are kept alienated from, thus, having no control over their production. These workers are subsidiaries for the accumulation of wealth of the rich. Unfortunately, the workers pay a high price for living such a miserable life; a life of constant pain and suffering. These workers are not able to fulfill their physical and material needs. A precursor of Marx, Shelley questions the logic of working from morning till late if their labour is futile. He says,

There is no real wealth but the labour of man.... To make a manufacturer [worker] work 16 hours where he only worked 8; to turn children into lifeless and bloodless machines at an age when otherwise they would be at play before the cottage doors of their parents. For fourteen hours' labor which they do perform, they receive—no matter in what nominal amount--the price of seven. (Shelley and Socialism)



Shelley not only employs his pen to speak specifically to the workers of England; he also practically participated in protests against the harsh Industrial laws of his age. Even in his early years he had participated in the Irish emancipation campaign, distributing pamphlets and motivating the Irishmen. Shelley continued with this activism and lamented the passivism of effected workers; even furious at the factory workers and condemns them strongly by not revolting. Otherwise, Shelley believes, with their inaction they will trace their grave and intimate them that, “England be your sepulcher.”(Shelley 406). Shelley proposes the same says in “Fragment; To the People of England”: “People of England, ye who toil and groan/ Who reap the harvests which are not your own/ Who weave the clothes which your oppressors wear?” . Shelley believes that these exploited workers have, then, every right to rebel.

Before Marx, Shelley was the one who stood for collective resistance by motivating the masses to “Arise, arise, arise! / There is blood on the earth that denies ye bread” (130) to achieve freedom and vouched for “people taking action for themselves through collective resistance” (Mulhallen 170). Various revolutionary and freedom movements in Europe always inspired Shelley as he was expecting a similar uprising in England. There was early trade –union movements and demonstrations for democracy, however, he was among the the earlier poets of the rising Industrial age to show the awakening of class consciousness of the workers. His poem, ‘Laon and Cynthia’ also known as ‘The Revolt of Islam’ inspired from the French revolution argues that the, “revolutions must be enacted in accordance with the social vision that the revolutionaries aspire to”. (Woodcock XX). Mulhallen argues that Shelley’s thoughts were for reformations, but he believed “a small amount of revolutionary force could be justified in opposition to the large-scale, systematic violence of an exploitative class society” (170). The revolutionary poem “Hellas” (1821), inspired from the events in Greece where the people had rebelled against the Turks, in spirit anticipated *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). In the preface of the poem, Shelley writes:

This is the age of the war of the oppressed against the oppressors, and every one of those ringleaders of the privileged gangs of murderers and swindlers, called Sovereigns, look to each other for aid against the common enemy, and suspend their mutual jealousies in the presence of a mightier fear. Of this holy alliance all the despots of the earth are virtual



members. But a new race has arisen throughout Europe, nursed in the abhorrence of the opinions which are its chains, and she will continue to produce fresh generations to accomplish that destiny which tyrants foresee and dread (qtd in Cameron 234)

Due to his defiant stance and rebellious nature, Shelley faced strong criticism from the society in general and his family in particular. However, Shelley is never deterred by the circumstances and has courageously propagated the cause of the wretched ones. In a pamphlet “An Address to the People on the death of Prince Charlotte” (1822), Shelley mourns the execution of Bandreth, Ludlam and Turner. These young men were charged with high treason and were among the first victims of the hazards of Industrial revolution. In this pamphlet he reiterates that no doubt the loss of Princes Charlotte during childbirth is sad, but many women die in England during childbirth. The execution of the three men and the death of princes happened at the same time. He asks the question, ‘Do not their hearts beat in their bosoms, and the tears gush from their eyes?’ (Shelley 585). In the address, Shelley criticizes the system through which prevailed discontent and disaffection. Shelley is the voice of the poor who understands their ills. In ‘Rosalind and Helen’ (1817), he describes poverty in cold and clear:

Thou knowest what a thing is poverty
 Among the fallen on evil days
 ‘Tis Crime, and Fear, and infamy
 And houseless Want in frozen ways
 Wandering ungarmented, and pain
 And, worse than all, that inward stain
 Foul Self Contempt, which drown in sneers
 Youth’s starlight smile (qtd in Foot 67)

Shelley hates poverty and believes that poverty is the cause of ills and evils in society. He could not believe that the poor is born poor; it is not a divine law. Shelley disagreed with Malthus who believed that “certain fallacies exist in human society that usually leads to perennial problem, for example, it is commonly believed that the poor are needed for the society (Foot 70). Shelley believes this to be propaganda on part of the rich to pacify the poor. He also rejects the hypothesis of Malthus that poverty is natural and a divine law (Shelley 616). . In response to this, Shelley



raises his voice vociferously for the downtrodden segments of society by announcing, “I am the friend of the unfriended poor” (qtd in Foot 67). This slogan reflects Shelley’s sensitive soul, although born in an aristocratic family, raised his voice for the downtrodden.

Like a true reformer, Shelley observes the British society to be in poor condition which is needed to be changed. According to him reformation is needed in various institutions, especially the working condition in factories needed to be improved. Bakthawar Puri in her work, "A Marxist Approach in Reading Percy Bysshe Shelley’s ‘Song to the Man of England’” argues that this “working class is like bees which are busy working hard in communities to produce for the drones. It illustrates the condition in society, which is, there are a lot of people with the role as working class who serve the daily need of dominating people such as proprietor group” (86). Shelley feels pity for the working class whose life, he believes, is without, “leisure, comfort, calm, Shelter, food, love’s gentle balm” (qtd in Puri 86). Shelley was in favour of an organised movement as he devised in his prose work, *A Philosophical views of Reforms* (1822), to fight against oppression and injustice. As his teaching is in harmony with the socialist thought, Shelley believes that the tyranny of possessing class is responsible for all evil and misery. It is the ruling class and the state that commits exploitation and oppression. Therefore, he argues that “[T]he constituted authorities of the nation, they who possess whether with or without its consent the command of a standing army and of a legion of spies and police officers and hold all the strings of that complicated mechanism with which the hopes and fears of men are moved like puppets?” (Shelley 628).

Like other romantic poets, Shelley considered revolution as a solution for woes and deprivation of society calling for an insurgency in many of his poems. However, Shelley suggests that there is a need for an inner as well as an outer revolution, that “revolution as a process should embody its own ideals through the manner in which it enacts itself, a theme which recalls the idealistic selfishness and compassion advocated in Laon and Cynthia” (Woodcock XVII). But a time came when he calls for a violent change. Shelley calls for the up rise and a change like that was brought by the French revolution a few decades prior:

Sow	seed—but	let	no	tyrant	reap:
Find	wealth—let		no	imposter	heap:



Weave robes—let not the idle wear:
 Forge arms—in your defiance to bear. (405)

He encourages farmers to sow the seed, but warns them too that the harvest should not be reaped by the usurpers. Dr Ashish Gupta and Riaz Ahmad Pir argue that the poetry of Shelley presents two distinct moods of change. The one mood we see Shelley as a violent reformer who want to overthrow all the established institutions. From this mood come poems like, “The Revolt of Islam,” “Queen Mab,” “The Mask of Anarchy” and “Prometheus Unbound”. However, in his later works we find a different Shelley, where “Shelley is forever searching, following a vague, beautiful vision, forever sad and forever unsatisfied, always pursuing an ideal, hoping for something better that is to come” (2692). The latter category includes poems such as “Ode to the West Wind” and “To a Skylark”

Shelley anticipated the outlook of Marx and Engels in numerous ways. Cameron argues that, “he perceived the existence of classes and the class struggle, the value-producing role of labor and its exploitation, the special oppression of women, the repressive function of the State, and the evolution of the world into a classless society” (36). Shelley repudiates state Institution like monarchy and religion as he believes they are hurdle in the development of man; for him individual is more important. That is why in his narrative poetry we find kings or rulers as anti-heroes or usurpers. In a poem written by the pen name of a suspected person who attempted to murder King George III in 1786, Shelley accuses the rulers:

Yes! Smooth faced tyrants chartered by a power
 Called King, who in the castellated keep
 Of miserable dotage, pace the quay
 And by the magic of a dreadful word,
 Hated though dreadful, shield their impotence (255-256)

The governments were continuously opposing reforms not realizing that the working class in the factories and mills lived a miserable life as they were paid less. When the Peterloo massacre occurred in Manchester in which the workers protested rising unemployment and poor condition of life, Shelley authored his famous poem, “The Mask of Anarchy” (1819). Using a powerful metaphor, Shelley intends to unmask the people who are creating anarchy in England and have



hidden themselves in the cloak of social order, legitimacy, and morality. These people believe they are creating order while the poet believes it is disorder. Shelley encourages the worker to, “Stand ye calm and resolute/ Like a forest close and mute and to challenge ‘The old laws of England’” (399). Marie Guerti considers that the poem, “serves two purposes: the one immediate, a denunciation of the Peterloo Massacre, the other more remote, a condemnation of government and ruling class’ injustices of the sort which cause the miseries and servitudes of the people” (75). In the poem, Shelley has personified Murder, Fraud, Hypocrisy, various Destructions, and Anarchy. Shelley has been critical and satiric at the people in power but he also understands that true freedom can only be achieved through reasoning, with the use of science and intellect as he contends in these lines, “Science, Poetry, and Thought/Are thy lamps.” (Shelley 396). The poem reveals Shelley’s sincere intentions of reforming the British society and to make the working class realise the worth of their hard work.

Like Marx, Similarly Shelley considers religious institutions as a hurdle in the progress of society calling religion as the ‘halter of superstition.’ (qtd in Foot 56). While Shelley claims religion as the prop for tyranny while for Marx religion is like opium:

And many more Destructions played
 In this ghastly masquerade,
 All disguised, even to the eyes,
 Like Bishops, lawyers, peers, or spies. (388).

Shelley’s disapproval of religious thoughts was rooted since his early life resulting in his expulsion from Oxford University after writing the pamphlet, *The Necessity of Atheism*. He refused to listen to his father who asked him to recant; his reply was “Why should I believe this?” (qtd in Foot 51). He believed that religion was based on miracles, prophecies, and martyrdom. Shelley’s spiritual belief was influenced by Platonism and believed that religion is the Perception of the relation in which we stand to the principle of the universe. Moreover, Christianity, like all other religions, rests upon miracles, prophecies, and martyrdoms (Foot 52). Furthermore, Shelley’s argument for opposing religion is based on the perception that religion support ‘Tyranny’ as he wrote in “The Revolt of Islam”: “The will of strength is right—this human state/Tyrants, that they may rule, with lies thus desolate” (180). Shelley believes in virtue, but his concept of virtue is



exempted from the Christian concept of reward or punishment believing in the general help for humanity.

What can be deduced from his poetry is the fact that Shelley has shown keen interest in bringing about a social revolution in England. His understanding of surplus labour ‘exploitation’ and class struggle identify him as a socialist of the modern times. Mulhallen points out that, “Shelley’s most politically engaged writings expressed great social themes and a yearning for a better world, characterized by economic, social and sexual equality, with emotional force as well as political clarity”. Shelley’s life, writing and politics are all closely knitted; they all represent a radical, anti-capitalist tradition of mobilizing the lower class to change the society. Frederick Engels said that he had learned the poems of Shelley by heart. At that time ‘Queen Mab,’ one of Shelley’s major poems, was sometimes called ‘the Chartists’ Bible.’ Woodcock also remarks that in ‘Queen Mab’, “Shelley launches an attack on ,’commerce’, capitalism and money, backed by an extraordinary Note identifying human labour as the source of all wealth which has much in common the analysis offered later in the century by Karl Marx” (X111). Shelley concludes his famous poem “The Mask of Anarchy” with these lines heralding a new age; the age where laws and systems could be questioned:

‘Rise like lions after slumber
 In unvanquishable number
 Shake your chains to earth like dew
 Which in sleep had fallen on you –
 Ye are many – they are few.’ (401)

Similarly Karl Marx ends *The Communist Manifesto* with
 Working Men of All Countries, Unite! (58).

Conclusion

Both Shelley and Marx, representative writers of their respective ages, depict a realistic picture of their corresponding social environments in their works. To them, the poor have suffered because of the selfish moneyed and elites committing injustices and socio-economic exploitations. The latter group operates in the form of feudal and the industrial classes. Works of Shelley and Marx are reflective of the notion that in every society, especially in the capitalist society, it is the



common interests of the classes that become the main cause of exploitation and oppression, therefore, the material concerns morphing into concrete economic, political, and historical conditions give rise to the tug between the haves and have-nots. Although Industrialization had provided employment opportunities to the poor, the rising capitalists were treating industrial labour in an inhuman way. The Peterloo massacre is a clear example of this inhuman treatment.

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