



EXPLORING THE CONTEMPORARY ISSUE OF CHILD LABOUR IN 'THE CRY OF THE CHILDREN'

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ABSTRACT

The Cry of the Children is one of the important poem published in Blackwood Magazine in 1842 by Elizabeth Barret Browning, it is concerned with the contemporary issue of child labour. Victorian age is regarded as 'the golden age' of England. Besides the technological innovations and Industrial Revolution, class system remains one of the important Characteristic of Victorian England.

KEYWORDS: *Victorian age, Class system, Industrial Revolution, Child labour*

INTRODUCTION

Victorian age (1820-1914) is known for the rise in technology such as spinning wheel which revolutionised the textile industry, steam engines and railways which eventually led to Industrial Revolution, characterised by mass production as well as consumption. As the demand for the goods increased, so did the demand for the labourers. Class system existed during that time namely upper class who were the Industrialists who owned the means of production, middle class were the officers and lower class consists of labourers including children. Even after education was made compulsory through the Education act of 1870, children working in coal mines and mills were deprived not only from education but also from their childhood. The poor ventilation in mines caused respiratory problems which resulted in the poor health condition. Due to invention of Railways, some of the children were engaged as rail road workers. Elizabeth Browning highlights this miserable condition of children using ballad style in the poem. Education and a good health system were needed for children during those times, but it was limited only to the upper class and middle class to some extent.

In the opening paragraph, she addresses the people as 'brothers' and questions them if they are able to hear to the weeping of children who are engaged as laborers in mines and mills as they lean their heads against their mother's. The poetess has used the natural elements like lambs, young birds, fawns and flowers in the poem to depict the nature in contrast to industrial advancements taken place during the period. Furthermore, she questions the people for not caring the crying children as they are running out of time to ask so. One can get to know why the old man, old tree, old year, or old wound cry but the reason why young one's cry is hard to find. Technical innovations had affected the children working in mines negatively that major ill-effects upon their health are evident in the poem, because they are usually weak and tired. Long term exposure to hazardous materials have proven to be fatal even in the present times. It is ironical that death is considered to be blessing just because it would end the sufferings for the children. As mentioned in the poem, a girl named Alice has died prematurely, thus ending all of her

sufferings. Along with adverse physical health effects, labourers in those times also had suffered mentally as well. Working class during that era had to engage in long working hours from 12 to 14 hours per day which affected them psychologically. Even today, the area close to any factory or mine is not that pleasant as it is usually near the residential settlements or schools. The same can be clearly seen when the writer asks the children to stay away from mines and enjoy the nature by plucking flowers and singing, but children working there are psychologically drained that they are unable to do so due to unpleasant surrounding and escape the reality. This can be interpreted in two ways first being they are used to work and second, because no one even cares to help them out. The writer has depicted the miserable plight of young ones by asserting their physical as well as psychological state of mind when these children trembled during the work and their eyes are red because of insufficient sleep. Not only adults but even small children had to work for their survival. Children praying to the machines and instruments to stop for a while so that they can rest for some time. This shows their mental state during their work. Labourers working for hours would get low wages as compared to their work. Most of their hours were spent in the factories and mills, creating a lot of noise that they won't be able to communicate between themselves, no one could notice the children crying so they believe that their prayers won't reach God by cause of such noise. Losing faith is also visible in the poem when God is metaphorically referred as "dumb like a stone". The prayers made to God are questioned by the working children, their assumptions conclude losing of hope for a better living in future.

The Great Exhibition of 1881 at crystal palace symbolised the prosperity of England but the underlying conditions of labour class and working children in particular were ignored. As a coin has two sides, in the same way it is seen during the contemporary period that along with the advancements, conditions of labourers were worsened. To meet the desired demand, more production of goods within less time has to be done. Trade unions were formed to counter the exploitation of labourers. Measures to improve the conditions of labourers was noticeable from the passing of



Factory Act in 1833, which stated 48 hours per week as working hours for 9 to 13 age group and 12 hours per day for 13 to 18. Victorian era broke the love for the nature element which existed in romantic period, and shifted to materialist and urban mindset.

CONCLUSION

During the Victorian period, England was developing at a great pace but the conditions of labour class and working children was no less miserable than those of slaves. Slavery Abolition act was passed in 1833, only the children below the age group of six were exempted. Some children worked as slaves and some of them worked in mines and mills to counter their weak financial condition. Elizabeth Browning has perfectly depicted the condition of child labours in her poem.

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