

A MARXIST APPROACH IN READING PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY’S “SONG TO THE MAN OF ENGLAND”

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Abstract

This study is aimed to uncover some Marxist issues in one famous poetry in Romantic period: Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Song to the Man of England". Shelley sees that life with hierarchy in social structure is not fair. The life of working class is so miserable. They work hard with all of their power, energy, time, and mind to serve the landlord. However, the working class never get a fair justice for their life. Some concepts of Marxism such as class struggle and alienation will be used as theoretical framework in this study. The result of the study shows that Shelley's "Song to the Men of England" represent the characteristic of romantic poem written by romantic poet which is full of the sanctity of imagination. It constructs an ideal world based on the contemplation of beauty. It tries to be the founder of civil society and the inventors of the arts of life. It tries to be a kind of prophecy which has ability to change the condition of politics, social, and spiritual life, especially the life of working class in England.

Keywords: Marxism, Alienation, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Romanticism.

1. INTRODUCTION

“Song to the Men of England” is one of Shelley’s poem which tells about the life of working class in England. At that time, Shelley sees that the social structure and condition is full of problem of humanities, where there are exist two groups of people: the landlord as dominant group, the other one is the working class as the dominated group. There is a hierarchy between the landlord and working class. The working class lives under the oppression and exploitation of the landlord group. Their life is under controlled by the landlord group.

Shelley sees that the life with these kind of hierarchy in social structure

is not fair. The life of working class is so miserable. They work hard with all of their power, energy, time, and mind to serve the landlord. However, the working class never get a fair justice for their life. They still live in a poor condition. They never live with good economic condition: the never have a proper food, clothes, and house. They are also has a minor power in social condition. On the other hand, the condition of the landlord group is full of wealth and prosperity. While the working class is work hard to produce something, the landlord group never work and only get profit from the sweat of the working class’.

In my opinion, although “Song to the Men of England” is a poem by Shelley which talks about politics, it still has a strong correlation with the core of romanticism. It is written with a deep contemplation of beauty. The function of the poem is a kind of golden bridge to achieve the ideal life which is full of freedom, love, and prosperity. The ideal world constructed by Shelley cannot be achieved when there is a social injustice caused by the differentiation in social structure, and also the exploitation from the landlord group as the dominant and the working class as the dominated.

“Song to the Men of England” also represent the romantic style in writing poem, especially in case of passion. In the poem, it can be seen there is a strong passion to the liberty, whether it is a political liberty or social liberty. In “Song to the Men of England”, there is an ideal of human happiness based on beauty. Shelley tries to use a poem as the founder of civil society and the inventors of the arts of life. In order to achieve these ideal world, the poem never afraid to rebel, to confront with the dominant values in the society. Even the poem is never afraid to persuade people, especially working class, that they should contemplate about themselves, they

should not live under the suppressed regime of the tyrant.

In “Song to the Men of England”, based on his sanctity of imagination, Shelley tries to confront between the good and the evil. The white and the black. What is the ideal world and what is the false in the world. Implicitly, Shelley tries to say that the social structure is wrong and people should fight against it, especially the working class which their life is so exploited by the landlord group. In this context, a poem is a kind of prophecy, it has an ability to change the condition of politic, social, and spiritual life.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In analysing this poem, the writer use some concept of Marxist literary critics to reveal the social structure and its effect in Shelley’s “Song to the Men of England”. According to this approach, there are two groups in the society as the effect of social structure based on mode of production. Those two are: the capitalist class as the dominant group, the other one is the working class group. However, before the economy become the infrastructure which influence the suprastructure, there is a condition in

society which the mode of production is based on the ownership of a land called the feudal period. In the feudal period, the hierarchy between the dominant and the dominated is similar. The landlord become the dominant group which dominates the working class as the dominated group.

Alienation is a concept developed in Marxism as a part of criticism to capitalism. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx divides alienation into 4 kinds of alienation happened by working class:

a. From Products of own Labor

The first kind of alienated labor is the separation of the worker from the products which is produced by the worker. In Capitalism, workers create products or object, but workers have no control for the products. The products which are produced by the worker are taken away and sold for profit for capitalist class because the products are belonging to capitalist class.

b. From the Process of Production

Since the product is separated from the worker and the worker does not have control over the product, the production process itself becomes an active alienation for the working class. Worker does not feel happy for their

work. The process of production becomes misery for working class.

c. From Species-being

Human have a consciousness and a will. This is the essence of humanity. But the economy and politics system press them to work hard in order to get money to fulfill their need. Individual is identified as a worker, and only in being a worker, an individual is important in economical perspective. Moreover, individual acts like machines than as a human being.

d. From another Person

Human relations are reduced to market relationships and finally become a relationship based on economy relationship. They are alienated from another person as they are alienated from themselves.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Issue of Working Class in Shelley's "Song to the Men of England"

"Song to the Men of England" is like a radical propaganda written by Shelley, addressed to all people in England. He persuades all people of England to see their country as the way Shelley sees it. Explicitly, Shelley says that England is a tyrannical, imbalanced

country where the rich reap all the fruits of the poor's hard labor.

The poem tries to fight against the tyranny and slavery in England. The main goal of this poem is to lead the men of England, specifically the working class, to a life which is full of freedom, love, and total comprehension of beauty. Correlated with the French Revolution, the poem was written for the working-class people of England. Written in the romantic period, the poem has similar characteristics with other romantic poem: to urge people to the life of freedom with deep contemplation of beauty.

In “Song to the Men of England”, Shelley illustrates the social condition in England which is full of social injustice. There are groups of people according to their class. The dominant class is dominating the dominated class. The domination lead to social injustice which lead other impacts such as poverty, exploitation, and alienation. It can be seen in the quotation below:

*Men of England, wherefore plough
For the lords who lay ye low?
Wherefore weave with toil and care
The rich robes your tyrants wear?
(Song to the Man of England, Stanza 1)*

From the quotation above, it can be seen that there are two groups of

people according to their role in the society. Firstly, there is a landlord group who has land as the capital. They are the dominating group which dominates the working class who is dominated. The working class does not have land as capital and they should work for the landlord to get money in order to survive. Explicitly, it is illustrated that the landlord group is a group of tyrants which exploits the working class. The exploitation of landlord group to the working class leads the social injustice and a miserable life of working class.

The second stanza of “Song to the Men of England” shows additional idea of the differentiation between the tyrant and working class. It can be seen in the quotation below:

*Wherefore feed and clothe and save
From the cradle to the grave
Those ungrateful drones who would
Drain your sweat—nay, drink your
blood?
(Song to the Men of England, Stanza 2)*

From the quotation above, implicitly, it illustrates the condition of society in England. The landlord, the dominant group, is associated with “drones”, a group of highly ranked male bee that does not work and produces no honey. It is a kind of symbol that the

landlord who has capital does not need to work and exploits the working class. The exploitation happened to working class is “eternal”. It starts from “the cradle” to “the grave”. It is like an illustration that there is an evil circle of feudalism, and later, capitalism, which always exploits working class.

The hierarchy between the landlord group as dominant group and the working class as dominated group is strongly illustrated in third stanza below:

*Wherefore, Bees of England, forge
Many a weapon, chain, and scourge,
That these stingless drones may spoil
The forced produce of your toil?
(Song to the Men of England, Stanza 3)*

From the quotation above, it can be seen that Shelley use “bees of England” as an association of working class. Bees are an animal which live in a community and their life are divided into some groups according to each role. The working bees usually consist of a lot of bees which work hard to supply the daily need of 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 landlord group. From the stanza above, it can be seen that the life of working class is full of struggle,

associated with weapon, chain, and scourge. While, the life of landlord is so easy. They are only exploiting working class and get all product of working class’ production.

The idea of social injustice is strongly illustrated in the fourth stanza. It illustrates the condition, the feeling of being the working class. It can be seen in the quotation below:

*Have ye leisure, comfort, calm,
Shelter, food, love’s gentle balm?
Or what is it ye buy so dear
With your pain and with your fear?
(Song to the Men of England, Stanza 4)*

From the stanza above, it can be seen the social injustice happened to the working class. The exploitation is strongly illustrated in the stanza. The life of working class is so miserable. Their life is without leasure, comfort, calm, shelter, food, and love. It is contrast with their hard work to the landlord. With the exploitation, the life of working class is full of pain and fear.

3.2 Issue of Alienation in Shelley’s “Song to the Men of England”

One impact of social injustice and exploitation happened to the working class who are dominated by landlord group is alienation. It means that the working class is estranged with their life.

They cannot be themselves. Because of the exploitation and slavery by the dominant group, the working class cannot identify their identity as humankind.

The fifth stanza of the poem shows the alienation happened to the working class. It can be seen in the quotation below:

*The seed ye sow, another reaps;
The wealth ye find, another keeps;
The robes ye weave, another wears;
The arms ye forge, another bears.
(Song to the Men of England, Stanza 5)*

From the stanza above, it can be seen that the working class is alienated from their aspect of human life. “The seed ye sow, another reaps; the wealth ye find, another keeps”, and so on. All they do, all they produce, and all their life, they cannot recognize it all. They do not have it all. It shows that they are alienated with their product of production. From the stanza analyzed before, they are also alienated with the process of production where they do not enjoy with their work and their life become more miserable because of it.

The sixth stanza is the additional “propaganda” written by Shelley which shows his position. It also shows the freedom of Shelley to express his feeling. The freedom here is the freedom to

speech, while the risk of speech is the confrontation with the dominant power. The freedom of speech here is also the representation, and a persuasion to the freedom life, as a main characteristic of many romantics’ poets at that time. It can be seen in the quotation below:

*Sow seed—but let no tyrant reap:
Find wealth—let no imposter heap:
Weave robes—let not the idle wear:
Forge arms—in your defence to bear.
(Song to the Men of England, Stanza 6)*

The last stanza shows the additional alienation towards working class. It illustrates that the working class cannot recognize them anymore. They are alienated; they are estranged from their essence of human life. They are led to their grave and build it by themselves. They cannot recognize their descendant. England, their home, their country, cannot provide comfort life and only gives death to the working class. It can be seen in the quotation below:

*With plough and spade and hoe and
loom
Trace your grave and build your tomb
And weave your winding-sheet—till fair
England be your Sepulchre.
(Song to the Men of England, Stanza 8)*

3.3. Comparison and Contrast with Blake’s ”The Chimney Sweeper”

As a poem which was born in romantic period, Shelley's "Song to the Men of England" and Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" has a lot of similar characteristics. Firstly, those two poems talk about social condition in England which is full of problems and social injustice that lead to poverty, exploitation, and alienation, especially happened to the working class. Those two poems become a social criticism which radically attack the social structure and values at that time. As the characteristic of romanticism, those two poems never afraid to become a rebel to the established social structure at that time.

Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" also has the similar characteristic of Shelley's "Song to the Men of England" described above. Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" is also a temperamental romantic poem which persuade people to attack the "wrong" social condition in the society. It reflects the ideal of human happiness based on beauty. It tells about the political and social liberty, especially of the children who work as the chimney sweeper. Blake's "Chimney Sweeper" constructs an ideal world based on the beauty and the sanctity of imagination. It also tries to be a kind of prophecy, tries to

change the condition of politic, social, and spiritual life.

The contrast between Shelley's "Song to the Men of England" and Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" is quite in blur area. The different between those two poems is that Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper", in certain point, is influenced with little realist style where it describes the condition of children who work in the factory in a style of realist. On the other hand, Shelley's "Song to the Men of England" is quite strong with romantic style and use a lot of metaphor, such as the bees as the representation of the working class. Moreover, Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" is specifically tells about the specific problem: the children who works in a factory as the chimney sweeper. While, Shelley's "Song to the Men of England" tells about the general issue happened to the working class which is suppressed by the landlord as the dominant group.

4. CONCLUSION

Shelley's "Song to the Men of England" represent the characteristic of romantic poem written by romantic poet which is full of the sanctity of imagination. It construct an ideal world based on the contemplation of beauty. It

tries to be the founder of civil society and the inventors of the arts of life. It tries to be a kind of prophecy which has ability to change the condition of politics, social, and spiritual life, especially the life of working class in England.

Shelley's "Song to the Men of England" has a similar characteristic with Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper". As romantic poem, those two poems try to construct an ideal world based on beauty. However, there are some contrast such as "The Chimney Sweeper" is more influenced by realist style and it tells about specific matter of the children who work in the factory as a chimney sweeper.

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