

**ÇANKAYA UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
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**MASTER'S THESIS**

**WRITING AS A CHALLENGE TO VICTORIAN PATRIARCHAL VALUES:  
ELIZABETH BROWNING'S *AURORA LEIGH***

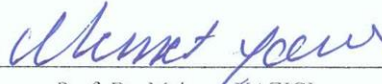
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Elizabeth Browning's *Aurora Leigh***

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## ABSTRACT

### WRITING AS A CHALLENGE TO VICTORIAN PATRIARCHAL VALUES: ELIZABETH BROWNING'S *AURORA LEIGH*

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Elizabeth Barrett Browning's long narrative poem *Aurora Leigh* tells the story of a woman who strives to be a poet in the Victorian period. However, writing poetry was not easy for women due to gender inequalities and obstacles in this period. By discussing the gender-specific applications in many spheres such as marriage, employment, education and literature, I will try to display the fact that women faced different obstacles in those spheres in the Victorian period. Despite those obstacles and inequalities, Aurora Leigh, the heroine in Browning's poem is determined to be a poet. At last Aurora succeeds in becoming a poet and marries her cousin Romney Leigh. Her success and this marriage plot show that womanhood is not an obstacle for being a poet. This thesis aims to deal with the difficulties Aurora faces in her journey towards being a poet as a woman due to the values of the patriarchal Victorian society. Depiction of every stage of Aurora's growth and her experiences with some other characters in the poem show men's vision of womanhood. Discussing this vision of patriarchal society, this thesis shows how Browning problematizes conventional gender roles in the Victorian society, gives voice to women in the world of poetry, and uses writing as a challenge to the values of the Victorian patriarchal society by her *Aurora Leigh*.

**Key words:** Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, Victorian period, Poetry.

## ÖZ

### VICTORIA ATAERKİL TOPLUMUNUN DEĞERLERİNE BİR BAŞKALDIRI OLARAK YAZMA: ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'IN AURORA LEIGH ADLI ŞİİRİ

KAYA, Soner

Yüksek Lisans, İngiliz Edebiyatı ve Kültür İncelemeleri

Tez Yöneticisi: Doçent Dr. Özlem UZUNDEMİR

Elizabeth Barrett Browning'in *Aurora Leigh* adlı uzun anlatı şiiri Victoria döneminde şair olmaya çalışan bir kadının hikayesini ele almaktadır. Ancak cinsiyet eşitsizlikleri ve çeşitli engellerden dolayı bu dönemde şiir yazmak kadınlar için kolay değildir. Evlilik, iş hayatı, eğitim ve edebiyat gibi alanlarda cinsiyete dayalı uygulamalar ele alınarak, kadınların bu alanlarda farklı engellerle karşı karşıya kaldıkları gösterilmektedir. Bu engel ve eşitsizliklere rağmen, Browning'in şiirindeki kadın kahraman Aurora Leigh şair olmaya karardır. Sonunda şair olmayı başaran Aurora aynı zamanda kuzeniyle evlenmektedir. Aurora'nın başarısı ve bahsi geçen evlilik konusu kadınlığın şair olmak için bir engel teşkil etmediğini göstermektedir. Bu tez bir kadın olarak şair olma yolunda ataerkil toplumun değerlerinden dolayı karşılaştığı zorlukları ele almaktadır. Aurora'nın bütün gelişim evrelerinin betimlenmesi ve kahramanın şiirdeki diğer karakterle ilişkileri erkeklerin kadınlığa bakış açısını gözler önüne sermektedir. Bu tez, ataerkil toplumun bu bakış açısını ele alarak, Browning'in *Aurora Leigh* adlı şiiri aracılığıyla Victoria toplumundaki geleneksel cinsiyet rollerini nasıl sorunsallaştırdığını, şiir dünyasında kadınların sesini nasıl duyurduğunu ve ataerkil toplumun değerlerine yazarak nasıl başkaldırdığını göstermektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, Victoria dönemi, Şiir.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Born into the Victorian society, Elizabeth Barrett Browning tried to overcome the inequalities Victorian women faced in terms of education, as well as legal and social rights. Although she had a similar fate with her contemporaries in terms of deprivation of formal training, she was determined to write with her mostly self-taught nature. She was aware of the fact that writing was like a weapon for women in their struggle for their rights and in their endeavours to make their voice heard by the society. Accordingly, she valued writing and used it as a means of confronting the problems of her age and protesting gender-specific values. Because of such characteristics of her writing, Browning, “was the most celebrated woman poet of the Victorian era. She was admired by contemporaries as varied as William Wordsworth, Queen Victoria, Edgar Allan Poe (who introduced an American edition of her work), Christina Rossetti, and John Ruskin (who proclaimed ‘*Aurora Leigh*’ the greatest poem in English)” (Henderson & Sharpe, 2004: 528). Thus, through her leading position in poetry as a woman, she problematized the fixed gender roles of her time and showed that women could become prominent figures in poetry like the male poets.

Browning considered writing as an opportunity for women to express their feelings and talk about themselves as well as contemporary issues. However, writing poetry for women was a demanding task, as they were not considered to be educated for this profession. Accordingly, fiction was considered to be more suitable for women rather than writing poetry as poetry deals with elevated subjects whereas fiction focuses on domestic issues, which women know well. As Marjorie Stone argues:

Victorians viewed epic, philosophic, and racy satiric poetry as male domains, but thought the novel more suited to female writers.... Novels did not require



or display the knowledge of classical models barred to most women . . . and the novel was less subjective than the prevalent lyric and confessional poetic forms and therefore more congruent with the self-effacing role prescribed for Victorian women (Stone, 1987: 115)

As this quotation suggests, writing poetry required a substantial education, particularly in classical literature. On the other hand, fiction was considered more suitable for women who were disadvantaged in terms of education and thus remained in the domestic sphere. Ian Watt, in his *The Rise of the Novel* admits that since women's life were centred around the private sphere and family matters, "the feminine sensibility was in some better ways equipped to reveal the intricacies of personal relationships and was therefore at a real advantage in the realm of the novel" (Watt, 1957: 298). As a result, writing poetry was considered to be under the domain of men since it required formal education to which men found full access but women could not due to the aforementioned lack of formal education.

Although the world of poetry was closed to women, woman poets such as Christina Rossetti, Mary Coleridge and Charlotte Mew, on whom Elizabeth Barrett Browning had influence, appeared and started to write poems which centred on woman's question. For instance, Christina Rossetti challenges the woman's place in the society in her poem "Goblin Market". Those women poets show that women's absence in the world of writing particularly in poetry was surely not a result of women's so-called inferiority by birth but a result of gender inequalities. Women's exclusion from poetry was intentional and as Helen Cixous claims "writing has been run by libidinal and cultural – hence political, typically masculine – economy, that this is a locus where the repression of woman has been perpetuated, over and over more or less consciously" (Cixous, 1976: 879). In her statement, Cixous acknowledges how women felt the pressure of gender roles particularly in writing. Since writing is regarded as a way of conveying thoughts and making changes in the

societal structures, writing, according to Cixous, has been an area “where woman has never her turn to speak” (Cixous, 1976: 879).

Despite difficulties in the realm of poetry, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was determined to write since infancy, and the scarcity of woman poets was stressed by her in her search for a role model, saying “I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none” (Browning, 1899: 231). Despite the lack of such models which is stressed in this quotation, Browning tried to write with the intention of challenging the male dominance in poetry. More precisely, she strived to write to achieve “self-assertion in the masculine world” (Mermin, 1986: 68). As Elaine Showalter in her seminal book *Towards A Feminist Poetics* suggests, Browning decided to write “to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories” (Showalter, 1986: 131). Browning’s efforts to write about women is important in terms of ‘Gynocriticism’ which is a term used for the criticism of texts written by women. Accordingly, Showalter, asserts that for gynocriticism it is important for women: “to free [themselves] from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture” (Showalter, 1986: 131), because works published by men were not adequate to reflect the period and women’s condition, and they identified women with frailty, shabbiness, inferiority and weakness. Having noticed all those realities, Browning decided to write a work representing women which was thought to be “a slippery and demanding task” (showalter, 1981: 249). In her correspondence with Robert Browning, she tells him:

My chief intention just now is the writing of a sort of novel-poem ... running into midst of our conventions.... Without mask the humanity of the age, speaking of the truth as I conceive of it.... That is my intention. It is not mature enough yet to be called a plan. I am waiting for a story, I won’t take

one, because I want to make my own stories, because then I can take liberties with them in the treatment (Browning, 1899: 53).

The work she meant in this quotation was *Aurora Leigh* in which the poet criticized the Victorian patriarchal values not only through its characters but also through its poetic style, and it aimed to provoke women to move away from their domestic sphere to become writers. Firstly, it was unusual with its style because Browning included a content which would be more suitable for a novel and adapted it to the poetic form which was not seen suitable for women. As a result she created a lengthy narrative poem about a woman's efforts and journey towards being a poetess in the Victorian era. Hence, the work "with its Miltonic echoes, the blank-verse format claims epic importance not only for the growth of the woman poet, but also for a woman's struggle to achieve artistic and economic independence in modern society" (Henderson & Sharpe, 2004: 529). All in all, it is clear that the work has been outstanding not only because of its content but also its form.

The heroine of this poem, Aurora Leigh, is a determined, brave and ambitious woman, who strives to struggle against the injustices of her era and to become the mouthpiece of her contemporaries. She is born to an English father and an Italian mother. After the death of her mother at an early age she is raised by her father until she becomes thirteen. When her father dies she moves to England where most of the story takes place. Although she encounters some hardships in England, she decides to be a prolific poetess rather than being a hardworking woman in the domestic sphere. Therefore, as Virginia Woolf asserts, Aurora Leigh, "with her passionate interest in social questions, her conflict as artist and woman, her longing for knowledge and freedom, is the true daughter of her age" (Woolf, 1932: 229). Here, Woolf's assertion is based on the fact that Aurora struggled with the difficulties of the age and succeeded in her poetic career. Aurora helps her female contemporaries like Marian Erle in order to question the social norms and inequalities prevalent in the Victorian society. At the end of the poem, Aurora marries her cousin Romney

Leigh, whose proposal she refuses earlier because of her determination to be a writer. This marriage may sound paradoxical as Aurora fights against male hegemony but when the whole story is taken into consideration, the contradiction is resolved; at first she refuses her cousin in order to have a career in writing but then accepts after Romney and his vision of womanhood and women's writing change, which she admits himself. This marriage is the "picture of how the two sexes might work together so that each could achieve its fullest human potential" (Henderson & Sharpe, 2004: 529). So, Aurora accomplishes her wish to be a poet. All in all, Aurora Leigh, as a successful poetess, "attained such a height of poetic excellence, not in spite of her woman's nature, but by means of it" (Everett, 1857: 419), and by this way shows that gender cannot be a hindrance in becoming a writer.

This thesis, therefore, aims to analyse Elizabeth Browning's poem *Aurora Leigh* with respect to women's situation in the Victorian era to display how a poetess challenges Victorian morality and gains self-esteem by becoming a writer. Thus she becomes the voice of women and shows "the enormous possibilities of a poetic tradition in which women participated on equal terms" (Henderson & Sharpe, 2004: 529). In the second chapter of this thesis, the conditions of women during the Victorian period will be examined and the focus will be on how women were seen by the society, how they were treated and what was expected of them. I will also discuss women's education and participation in the workforce, owning property, their right to divorce and vote, and their role in the society. In the third chapter of this thesis, I will focus on Aurora's life from infancy to adulthood and how she succeeds in becoming a writer. The suffering she goes through shows the difficulties women faced in the Victorian era. I will also discuss how Aurora challenges the Victorian masculine mind-set and overcomes the difficulties; as a result, she grows into a model figure for other women. The marriage plot will also be dealt with to point out marriage did not mean compliance with the Victorian morality because Aurora's marriage with Romney emphasizes the equality between the sexes

## CHAPTER TWO

### GENDER INEQUALITIES IN THE VICTORIAN PERIOD

Victorian period was characterized by economic developments and scientific inventions such as the steamship and the railway system. As a result of industrial revolution, England became a powerful country because of the developed trade and industry. The country was ruled by a queen, Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901, and despite such advancements in science, industry and trade, there was inequality between the social classes and genders. From working life and education to literature, there were gender specific applications most of which were against women. Unfortunately, some of these injustices were supported by the law and the others were based on the expectations of the society since it labelled womanhood with certain characteristics such as weakness and inferiority. Hence, it would be true to say that in the Victorian period, “whatever their social rank ... women were second-class citizens” (Gallagher, 1988: 57).

Being in the disadvantaged position in many areas such as education, literature and business, women were considered to be suitable only for domestic work such as cleaning, bringing up children, satisfying males at home. Whether they were married or single, they were like workers at home serving their fathers, brothers, husbands or other male members of their family. As Jenni Calder asserts, “the home and the female were inevitably intimately associated” (Calder, 1977: 9). Marriage did not change their role of being at home and they kept carrying out the household duties and obeying their husbands. Despite differences in the application, the perspective on womanhood and domesticity was similar in all classes. Not only the working class women, but also upper-middle class women were considered to be suitable for domesticity. Although there were servants to do the housework, upper-class women had to stay at home to be busy with the tasks such as regulating the budget of their houses and supervising the servants at home. Hence, irrespective of

their class, if a woman “did not undertake the responsibility of making her home attractive she could not blame her husband for spending his evenings at the club, or seeking more dubious forms of entertainment” (Calder, 1977: 70). As Walter E. Houghton asserts, the Victorian woman was a “submissive wife whose whole excuse for being was to love, honour, obey - and amuse - her lord and master, and to manage his household and bring up his children” (Houghton, 1957: 348).

Since the family was regarded as a very important institution and women were considered to be the building blocks of this domestic sphere, middle class women were not allowed to work in other fields. Women working outside home were seen as a threat to the family life. All these attitudes towards women were based on the belief that women were born biologically inferior to men and their brains and power were suitable for the domestic sphere. Such difference between the sexes is also suggested by Charles Darwin who said that “the average of mental power in man must be above that of women” (Darwin, 1896: 564). He also claimed that men had “a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can women — whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands” (Darwin, 1896: 564). Accordingly, the stereotypical gender role was articulated in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “The Princess” from the mouth of the king in the poem:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth;  
Man for the sword, and for the needle she;  
Man with the head, and women with the heart;  
Man to command, and woman to obey

(V. 347-350)

## 2.1 Marriage and Women's Rights

From above discussion about women, it is clear that the roles, nature and potentials of men and women are rigidly categorized by the society. In addition, women doing the housework were seen as “angels in the house” which was a term created by Coventry Patmore in line with the viewpoint of the patriarchal society. As angels in the house, women were attributed some duties as the wife in Coventry Patmore's “Angel in the House” says:

Man must be pleased; but him to please  
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf  
Of his condoled necessities  
She casts her best, she flings herself.

(1-4).

Men were seen as ones who had the heavy burden of the society on them and women were expected to please men since they were superior to women. In other words, a house was regarded “a place of renewal for men, after their rigorous activities in the harsh, competitive public sphere” (Gorham, 1982: 4). It is clear that staying in the domestic sphere was not something for the benefit of women but men, because women worked for men's comfort in this sphere. Concerning the roles of a woman in the domestic sphere, Virginia Woolf, in her essay “Professions for Women” asserts:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it — in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all — I need not say it —she was pure. Her

purity was supposed to be her chief beauty — her blushes, her great grace. In those days — the last of Queen Victoria — every house had its Angel (Woolf, 1942: 237).

As Woolf suggests, women were the ones who made sacrifices disregarding their own wishes. Queen Victoria, who devoted herself to her husband Prince Albert became a symbol of such domesticity.

As “the traditional role of women of all classes had been confined to that of mother in the home” (Oakland, 1989: 64), marriage was regarded as the best career for women. As a Victorian physician, William Acton asserts, “a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him” (quoted in Lure and Rose, 1979: 104). Hence, women’s chastity was considered to be one of their most important characteristics. Apart from doing domestic work, caring for their children and pleasing their husbands, women faced some inequalities. When they got married, they could not represent themselves and their husbands were their legal representatives. As John Oakland asserts, “wives and their property had been the legal possessions of their husbands” (Oakland, 1989: 64).

Married women did not have the right to get divorced until the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, when women gained this right in case of cruelty and adultery. Despite this legal procedure, women did not have official protection against male violence for a long time. It was only with the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878 that women were allowed to ask for protection against male violence. Apart from that, until 1839 women did not have the right to take their children’s custody after divorce and upon the 1839 Custody of Infants Act, it became “possible for wives estranged from their husbands to gain custody of children less than seven years old” (Nelson, 2007: 51). However, this was a partial improvement as the act involved the custody of children under the age of seven. They gained the right to have the



custody of their children under sixteen years old with the Custody of Infants Act of 1873.

When it comes to owning property, until 1870, married women did not have the right to own property and keep the money they earned or inherited during and after marriage. As Mary Beth Combs claims, “a woman, on marrying, relinquished her personal property—moveable property such as money, stocks, furniture, and livestock— to her husband’s ownership; by law he was permitted to dispose of it at will at any time in the marriage and could even will it away at death.”(Combs, 2005: 1031). After the Married Women’s Property Act of 1870, married women gained the right to own property or money in marriage. Furthermore, with the Married Women’s Property Act of 1882 women had the right to have control over their property and earning in their marriages. Since men were their legal representatives, women did not even have the right to vote and “women over twenty-one had to wait until 1928 for the franchise to be fully established in Britain” (Oakland, 1989: 64). As the quote implies, women had limited political rights as only those over the age of thirty had the right to vote and women did not have the right to vote on equal terms with men until 1928.

## **2.2 Women and Education**

The approach to femininity and the strict gender division in the Victorian period which have been told above also led to injustices in education. Women had either no access or limited access to it as it was believed that “to be learned is to be unfeminine. Innocence is based upon ignorance; that is what is charming. What does a woman want with learning? Let her know how to keep house, and look after her husband's and children's comfort. If she never marries, let her take a back seat and play the role of the maiden aunt, and be thankful” (quoted in Beetham & Boardman, 2001: 85).

Because their femininity was considered an obstacle as the quotation suggests, education was regarded as a futile attempt for women. In other words,

education was associated with masculinity. Rather than taking their time to be learned, women were expected to do their so-called womanly tasks. Approach to women's education was similar in social classes, in the upper and middle classes, the situation was not very different. In the upper classes women were expected to behave according to their husbands' social status, represent their husbands and amuse the guests. They were educated either by governesses at home, or at private schools. Hence, both working class women and upper class women were excluded from education and there was not even any state intervention until 1870 when the state-funded schools were introduced. However, this was a partial intervention in women's public schooling, because it introduced little improvements such as foundation of primary schools for girls and introducing compulsory primary education for girls. Still, it was a significant step for women to pursue their rights in other areas.

Due to obstacles concerning women's education, seeing educated women was not something common in the Victorian period. Education was not seen suitable for them because women were thought to have "smaller skulls than men, which meant smaller brains .... The physical demands of menstruation, growing breast and childbearing meant that there was less effort available for mental activity" (Paxman, 1998: 226). So, it was thought that women's brains were adequate for less education on the one hand, their education was seen as waste of time, on the other hand. As a consequence of that belief, education was a difficult domain for women to participate in professional life and "the term 'educated woman' was an oxymoron" (Paxman, 1998: 222), due to the lack of opportunities they had.

As a result of the lack of education, women's literacy was 55% which was low compared to men's literacy proportion of 70% in the 1850s. Women were either educated in the field of domesticity in their houses for their future roles in the domestic sphere or at private boarding schools with curricula prepared for them. The subjects to be studied at such schools included domestic issues, painting, singing, dancing which were necessary for their future motherly roles. As Jane McDermid suggests, "the education of girls in charity, dame and other private (or adventure)

schools had always been weighted towards the domestic, with poor girls more likely to be taught sewing and knitting than reading and writing” (McDermid, 2012: 3). Such an education at home or private institutions was offered by governesses who did not have the opportunity to go to school because of their gender. All in all, as Ruth Watts underlines, “the purpose of female education was to make girls fit for domestic lives as wives and mothers” (Watts, 2008: 185).

As mentioned above, the expected step was taken with the Education Act of 1870, which opened the way to women’s education. The act was very important for it was “the very first piece of legislation to deal specifically with the provision of education in Britain” (1870 Education Act). With this act, elementary school education became compulsory for both men and women, and “all children had to go to school up to the age of thirteen, where they were taught reading, writing and arithmetic” (McDowall, 1989: 151). Despite an increase in literacy, the compulsory elementary education did not change the condition of women’s education very much since there were gender-based curricula. Accordingly, the courses they took were cooking, cleaning, sewing, knitting and “by 1876 ‘domestic economy’ was a compulsory subject for girls at board schools” (Calder, 1977: 82). Apart from the domestic work, women were expected to improve themselves in dancing, music, drawing and flower arrangement which were seen necessary for women to entertain their husbands and guests.

After the act of 1870, although elementary school became compulsory for both sexes, women still had no or limited access to secondary education since there were not secondary schools accepting them. Furthermore, families valued the secondary education of their sons and did not consider their daughters’ secondary education. As F. M. L. Thompson suggests, it was not before “the 1880s and 1890s that there was anything like a rush of foundations of girls’ high schools and boarding schools, and until then it is a fair presumption that expensive secondary education for their daughters remained a decidedly secondary consideration with even upper-middle-class parents” (Thompson, 1988: 66).

As for higher education, it was almost impossible for women until Queen's college was founded in 1848. It was a crucial development of women's education because the college accepted "all girls over the age of twelve ... and it issued its own certificates of proficiency" (Banerjee). Although it was a positive step for women's education, still, there was a problem as "The teachers were all men [...] for there were no women with the necessary qualifications" (Grylls, 1949: 256). That reflected how women were excluded from education formerly as there were not qualified women to be recruited at that college. After the Queen's college, Bedford College was founded in 1849, and following those colleges some other colleges were founded. Still, women's education was not supported by the state, and education continued to be an area in which women were in a disadvantaged position.

University of London became the first university to accept women in 1878. The two prestigious universities Cambridge and Oxford, had some admission requirements for the students who wished to enrol in them. One of those requirements was to be a male. Therefore, no matter which social class she belonged to, a woman was not accepted to those prestigious universities, because they were not seen suitable for university studies and it was thought by the patriarchal society that:

women were not suited by temperament or intellect either for the clergy or for public life and they were not capable of the sustained rigorous work required by the university studies.... Many proper Victorians, men and women alike felt that advanced education would spoil women's cherished innocence and nurturing instincts (Tucker, 2014: 15)

Actually, it was so, because to be educated would provide the women with the power to claim their rights in many areas, which was considered to be a defiance of patriarchal norms. All in all, in this period, "patriarchal society valued the sons of the families and supported their higher education in order to preserve the superiority of men in all areas of life" (Demir, 2015: 55).

### 2.3 Women and Employment

In addition to education, employment opportunities for women were very limited, because they were seen as workers in the house as wives and mothers as mentioned before. Women's employment at the time was closely related to social classes. Working meant survival for lower class women but escape from domesticity for the middle class. In the lower class, both married and unmarried women participated in the workforce, whereas middle class women did not work after they married. For the lower class women, the conditions were very hard as they both had to work and do the housework. As statistics display, "around 30-40 per cent of women from working class families contributed significantly to household incomes in the mid-Victorian years" (Hudson, 2011). The job opportunities for women also showed how classes differ. For example, the women from lower class worked as factory workers and servants while middle class women worked as tutors or governesses.

As Francis Michael Longstreth Thompsom suggests, the society believed that "all females' employment outside the home, whether of married or unmarried women, whether in factories or elsewhere, made women into bad housewives and mothers because it deprived them of domestic training or inclination, and hence weakened the family" (Thompson, 1988: 87). Women's employment outside home was also considered against men's authority because they would economically support themselves. Wanda Fraiken Neff claims that a woman "with her own earnings was, accordingly, an affront against nature and the protective instincts of man" (Neff, 1967: 37). According to the Victorian mind-set, a woman earning her own living would undermine men's domination over women.

Despite the injustices and obstacles against women's employment, according to the census in 1841, 25% of women were employed, and also, according to the census in 1851, out of 10.1 million women, only 30.2% were employed and that was quite low compared to the percentage of working men. Women could not work in

many different sectors but in certain sectors such as manufacturing sector because they were thought to be “better suited to certain work than men” (Neff, 1967: 31). As the statistical data shows, women comprised “as much as 60 percent to 80 percent of the workforce in light industries such as cotton manufacturing” (Johnson, 2001: 1), as this sector did not require any qualification. Agriculture was another sector; according to Lydia Murdoch, “over 8 percent of all British female labourers worked in agriculture, the fourth largest category of female workers after domestic service, textile production, and clothing manufacture” (Murdoch, 1970: 172). The proportion of women working in these fields was nearly 85% in 1841 and 80% in 1851, but it was nearly 22% in 1841 and 20% in 1851 for men. Being a governess was another choice for women until they married.

Apart from working in few sectors, prostitution was another sector especially for lower-class women. According to the police records in the mid-Victorian period there were “2,828 brothels in London ... and there were about 80,000 prostitutes on the street” (Paxman, 1998: 212). The patriarchal society thought that “if men were sexually incontinent, it was the fault of women” (Paxman, 1998: 217). However, prostitution was not something women did willingly; it was a kind of escape from forced domestic work and hard working conditions. Namely, it was “a buffer against recurrent unemployment, and an escape from the close supervision of factory work or domestic service” (Murray, 1982: 392). It is clear that prostitution has a close contact with the economic condition of people and one of the most important cause of prostitution was, as Henry Mayhew points out, “the low rate of wages that the female industrial classes receive, in return for the most arduous and wearisome of labour” (Mayhew, 1861: 213). Therefore, prostitution was widespread in the lower class compared to middle and upper classes. However, as Murray points out “let women be trained to labour, and educated for self-support; then the greatest of all remedies will be applied to the cure of prostitution and women will cease to sell their bodies when they are able to sell their labour” (Murray, 1982: 389). Briefly, equal rights and opportunities for them in education would decrease prostitution rate.

Irrespective of the job and class, as Murdoch states, “women faced a set of common obstacles in the workplace” (Murdoch, 1970: 172). These obstacles were long working hours, sexual harassment, rape at work places and wage discrimination. For example, women earned less money than men for the same work they did. Even when women started to work as teachers towards the end of the century, the conditions, particularly wage discrimination resulting from gender inequality, did not change a great deal. Accordingly, “in 1890, male assistant teachers had an average annual salary of 117 pounds, while women earned 88 pounds for the same work” (Murdoch, 1970: 172). Especially, in the manufacturing sector, “manufacturers preferred [women] because they were cheap” (Neff, 1967: 30). This situation was in effect throughout the Victorian period despite few improvements such as regulation of hours and wage increase because women’s participation in work force “received legislative remedy, but new evils and difficulties multiplied more rapidly than the remedies” (Neilson, 1920: 329-330). Some of these evils and difficulties were sexual harassment at work, stalking along the way to and from work and unfair working conditions.

## **2.4 Women and Literature**

Discriminations against women were not only in the spheres mentioned above but also in literature. Literary creativity was thought to be a part of men’s nature. Accordingly, Gerard Manley Hopkins believed that men were gifted in writing inherently as he claimed “the artist’s most essential quality, masterly execution ... is a kind of male gift” (Hopkins, 1955: 133). Gilbert and Gubar interpret Hopkin’s view about male creativity saying “male sexuality ... is not just analogically but actually the essence of literary power. The poet’s pen is in some sense (even more than figuratively) a penis” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 4). Thus, men thought that the pen was a gift for them by birth and women’s attempt to write was a challenge to the male domain. In her poem “The Introduction”, Anne Finch points out:

Alas! A woman that attempts the pen  
Such an intruder on the rights of men,  
Such a presumptuous Creature is esteem'd  
The fault can by no vertue be redeem'd

(9-12)

It is clear that women's writing was seen as an offense and it was considered to be a faulty attempt. Before the last decades of the nineteenth century, it was still difficult for women to write. As Elaine Showalter asserts, "to their contemporaries, nineteenth-century women writers were women first, artists second" (Showalter, 1977: 73). In this quote, Showalter suggests the place of women writers in the nineteenth century. Gilbert and Gubar interpret Showalter's words by stating that "until the end of the nineteenth century the woman writer really was supposed to take second place to her literary brothers or fathers" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 61). Those women who attempted to write were considered to break the rules in the literary world and they were expected to apologize. Those "who did not apologize for their literary efforts were defined as mad and monstrous" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 63). In other words, the society believed that creativity which men had from birth did not exist in women's creation and it was important because such creativity "marks off men from women, the begetting of one's thought on paper, on verse, or whatever the matter is" (Hopkins, 1955: 133). This belief was so widespread that as Gilbert and Gubar claims, "those women who were among the first of their sex to attempt the pen were evidently infected or sickened by just the feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, and inferiority that their education in 'femininity' almost seems to have been designed to induce" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 59-60). Hence, the matter was so serious that some women writers such as George Eliot and the Brontë Sisters concealed their identities by using male pseudonyms.

Since women were thought to have been born lacking literary creative power, their literary attempts were seen as a waste of time, because writing was thought to



hinder them from doing their duties which were appropriate for their nature. In this sense, Anne Finch also stated :

They tell us, we mistake our sex and way;  
Good breeding, fassion, dancing, dressing, play  
Are the accomplishments we shou'd desire;  
To write, or read, or think, or to enquire  
Wou'd cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time,  
And interrupt the conquests of our prime;  
Whilst the dull mannage, of a servile house  
Is held by some, our outmost art and use

(13-20).

It is clear that Anne Finch expresses how writing, reading, thinking or questioning were abilities women's nature lacked. This shows also the dichotomy between men's intellectual power and women's bodily beauty. In Jane Austen's work *Persuasion*, the protagonist Anne Elliot says that "men have had every advantage of us in telling their story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands" (Austen, 1993: 184). Hence, women wrote to talk about gender discrimination and to manifest that creativity is not a male gift but women could become writers as well.

Writing was a demanding task for women, but poetry was more demanding and compared to the other genres, it had more obstacles for women. Discrimination against women in education was a factor which intensified the difficulties of writing poetry for women. Novel writing was more suitable for them because they did not need to have an extensive education in order to write a novel, since it was "a genre subservient to physical and social reality, most often requires reportorial observation

instead of aristocratic education” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 546). Hence, compared to poetry, fiction writing was easier to participate for the female writer because there was a difference among those genres in terms of training they required. Thus, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, the society believed that “novel writing does not seem to require the severely classical education poets and critics have traditionally thought verse-writing entails” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 547). As a result, women poets were rare and writing in verse was seen as a futile attempt for women. Elizabeth Barrett Browning said that "England has had many learned women... and yet where were the poetesses?" (qtd. in Avery & Stott, 2003: 3). With this question, she suggests the absence of women poets.

To conclude, in this chapter, the situation of women in the Victorian period has been studied. In part 2.1, the marriage institution, women’s rights as wives, their rights of divorce and custody of children, and their rights of owning property have been examined. Afterwards, in part 2.2, women’s education in the Victorian period has been studied. In this part, double standard in the field of education has been displayed. Furthermore, in addition to women’s primary, secondary and higher education, the Acts concerning women’s education have also been explained. In the next part, women’s employment has been studied and difficulties for women to participate in the workforce have been analysed. Also, occupations which were suitable for the women of the Victorian period and discriminations they experienced at work have been dealt with. In the last part of this chapter, women’s creative power in literature and distinction between writing prose and verse have been studied. All in all, it has been shown how difficult it was to be a “writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of the literary authority are patriarchal” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 45).

## CHAPTER THREE

### GENDER ROLES IN *AURORA LEIGH*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's narrative poem *Aurora Leigh* is written in blank verse and epic form with a subject based on a woman's strivings towards being a poetess in the Victorian period. Since women were not considered to be educated for verse writing and especially for the epic as discussed in the previous chapter, this genre was a sphere mostly in the hands of male writers some of whom were Homer, Virgil, Edmund Spenser, John Milton and William Wordsworth. In this sense, Michele C. Martinez asserts that "Classical, Christian and Romantic epic poetry was strongly associated with masculine spheres of action, be it martial (Homer, Virgil), theological (Dante, Milton), or philosophical (Wordsworth)" (Martinez, 2012: 13). *Aurora Leigh*, as "an epic of feminist self-affirmation" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 575), questions the epic tradition which is based on the adventures of the heroes written by male poets, by telling the adventures of a woman on the way to becoming a poet despite gender inequalities in the Victorian period.

As *Aurora Leigh* centres on the growth of its protagonist and development of her poetic career, it can also be considered as a *Künstlerroman* written in verse form. In this sense, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest, "*Aurora Leigh* is a *Künstlerroman* in blank verse about the growth of a woman poet and the education of her heart through pride, sympathy, love and suffering" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 575). Browning's masterpiece is a combination of verse and fiction, in other words, it is a mixture of the epic and the novel. As Michele C. Martinez confirms, "as a form of 'novelized epic', *Aurora Leigh* unapologetically takes contemporary life as its subject and creates a dialogue between the epic and the novel" (Martinez, 2012: 13). Aurora's infancy, love affair, marriage, strivings and sufferings have great importance in understanding the conditions of women in the Victorian period. Namely, the poem both displays how a woman struggles to be a powerful woman as

well as a poet, and it challenges the values of the patriarchal Victorian society from a woman's point of view. By focusing on the initiation of its protagonist, the work challenges some issues of the Victorian period as it displays gender inequalities in many areas such as education, marriage, business and literature through Aurora's growth. The lengthy poem also reflects the degree of those inequalities among women from different classes such as the lower-class woman Marian Erle, and the aristocrat Lady Waldemar. Thus, the work deals with woman's question in relation to class.

Aurora is not only the protagonist but also the narrator of her own story. Thus, it is clear that the work is based on the self-expression of a woman in the Victorian period and it becomes one of the important works that contributes to the development of the literary texts especially those texts in verse by women in this period. It provokes women to participate in the Victorian tradition of poetry despite the ideas about women and genres. In other words, *Aurora Leigh* questions gender-specific genres in the nineteenth-century. Briefly, through her criticism of gender inequalities and the processes of her artistic career development, Aurora Leigh challenges the patriarchal values by entering into the debates with some other characters on womanhood and women's participation in poetry.

### **3.1 Aurora's Youth and Early Training**

In line with the explanations above, the poem starts with a declaration by the heroine which explains her purpose in writing such a poem. She says:

OF writing many books there is no end;  
And I who have written much in prose and verse  
For others' uses, will write now for mine,—  
Will write my story for my better self,

(*Aurora Leigh*, I. 1-4)

Here, it is revealed by Aurora that she is already a mature poetess when she starts to write the poem as she stresses that until that time she wrote for other people in different genres. She decides to write for her own use and the subject matter is her own story. Namely, she decides to write her own story from infancy to adulthood and tell how her artistic career developed in the Victorian patriarchal society. In her story, she mirrors every stage of her development and shows the obstacles she encounters as a woman poet in this period.

Her infancy was not a happy one since she lost her mother when she was four-years-old. She mentions her first recollection of her mother, saying:

... I catch my mother at her post  
Beside the nursery-door, with finger up,  
"Hush, hush—here's too much noise!" while her sweet eyes  
Leap forward, taking part against her word  
In the child's riot.

(I.15-19)

This first remembrance of her mother shows how her mother beside the door is busy with her job of nurturing her daughter. Her mother's aim of hushing her child stands for the fact that women were thought to be silent in the society in the Victorian period even though she seems to favour her child's naughty behaviour. Aurora suggests that women were raised to do trivial work when she says:

... Women know  
The way to rear up children, (to be just)  
They know a simple, merry, tender knack  
Of tying sashes, fitting baby-shoes,

(I.47-50)

In this quote, Aurora underlines womanly duty of raising children. John Stuart Mill also discusses how the patriarchal society believes that “the natural vocation of a woman is that of a wife and a mother” (Mill, 1999: 94).

After her mother’s sudden death, Aurora is reared by her father in accordance with men’s way of thinking. She describes her upbringing as she says:

My father taught me what he had learnt the best  
Before he died and left me,—grief and love.  
And, seeing we had books among the hills,  
Strong words of counselling souls, confederate  
With vocal pines and waters,—out of books  
He taught me all the ignorance of men,

(I.186-191)

Here, Aurora stresses that her father rears and trains her with books by men. Reading those books, her worldview is shaped, and she learns too much about people, their ignorance and mind-set. She sets a similarity between herself raised by a father and Achilles by a mother who disguised him as a girl in order to prevent him from attending the war. She says:

... Thus, my father gave;  
And thus, as did the women formerly  
By young Achilles, when they pinned the veil  
Across the boy's audacious front, and swept  
With tuneful laughs the silver-fretted rocks,  
He wrapt his little daughter in his large  
Man's doublet, careless did it fit or no.

(I.722-728)

With this analogy between Aurora and Achilles, the narrator shows how well she is educated in classical literature. Achilles was disguised as a girl deliberately to escape fighting, on the other hand, Aurora is raised with men's attributes without taking into consideration whether they suit her or not. Raised by a father and having learned manly behaviour, Aurora becomes very critical about men and their thoughts.

Having learned manly behaviour, Aurora also learns that men have a vision of women as inferior and she reflects this manly vision in her description of her mother's portrait which was drawn by a man after her mother's death. What she sees in the portrait are:

Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite,—  
A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate,  
A loving Psyche who loses sight of Love,  
A still Medusa, with mild milky brows  
All curdled and all clothed upon with snakes  
Whose slime falls fast as sweat will; or, anon,  
Our Lady of the Passion, stabbed with swords  
Where the Babe sucked; or, Lamia in her first  
Moonlighted pallor, ere she shrunk and blinked,  
And, shuddering, wriggled down to the unclean;  
Or, my own mother, leaving her last smile  
In her last kiss...

(I.154-165).

The characteristics Aurora sees in her dead mother's portrait reflect men's vision of womanhood which she learnt both consciously and unconsciously during her growth. In other words, Aurora sees both the angelic look as well as the evil one, which reminds one of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's classification of the types of women in male writing as angels and devils. On the one hand, she sees the angelic side represented by Virgin Mary, on the other hand, she sees the wicked aspect

represented by such mythological figures as Medusa and Lamia. Although Aurora attributes positive concepts to her mother in her description of the portrait, those positive concepts clash with negative sides she sees in the portrait as they reflect the male painter's view of her mother. Accordingly, Aurora acknowledges how her nature is mingled with her rearing when she says "... As I grew / In years, I mixed, confused, unconsciously / Whatever I last read or heard..." (I. 146-148). In this sense, Linda K. Hughes suggests that "in *Aurora Leigh* the future poet's girlhood emotions, reading thoughts, and dreams - in short Aurora's conscious and unconscious self - converge on and with a dead image of the dead maternal body that paradoxically springs into uncanny life-forms ranging from the divine to the abject" (Hughes, 2010: 266). This paradoxical depiction of the mother as both divine and uncanny shows Aurora's conflicting views as a result of her rearing. Gilbert and Gubar also affirm that what Aurora sees in her dead mother's portrait is a result of manly behaviours and way of thinking she learnt. Accordingly, they assert that what Aurora implies "is not only that she herself is fated to inhabit male-defined masks and costumes, as her mother did, but that male-defined masks and costumes inevitably inhabit her, altering her vision" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 19). Thus, they suggest that the negative vision of the portrait by Aurora is a result of "male-defined masks" which have surrounded her.

Upon her father's sudden death when she was thirteen-years-old, she conveys her grief and her deep concern for her future as a woman saying:

... I was just thirteen,  
Still growing like the plants from unseen roots  
In tongue-tied Springs,—and suddenly awoke  
To full life and life's needs and agonies  
With an intense, strong, struggling heart beside  
A stone-dead father.

(I.205-210).



Apart from expressing her grief for her loss, she underlines her immaturity and need of protection as a girl. In addition, she is aware of the difficulties awaiting her because of her parent's absence. The words she uses to define her heart as intense, strong and struggling imply that she is ready to face the difficulties of life, and struggle as a powerful girl.

Aurora is sent to England after her father's death and her rearing continues in the custody of her aunt, Mrs. Leigh. Her aunt is an unmarried woman who behaves according to the values of the patriarchal society and acts as an agent of the Victorian society, which becomes clear in her rearing. Namely, Aurora's training is in line with preparing her for her future role as a wife and mother. Within the scope of such a training, Aurora is taught that women need to "keep quiet by the fire / And never say 'no' when the world says 'ay,' (I.436-437). This also implies that women were the ones who were expected to obey and do their so-called womanly duties in order to be appreciated by the patriarchal society.

Aurora's training starts with some changes in her physical appearance as she says "I broke the copious curls upon my head / In braids, because she liked smooth ordered hair. / I left off saying my sweet Tuscan words" (I.385-387). As women need to have a moderate appearance, Aunt Leigh prefers ordered look instead of the curly hair. Aurora's diction is changed as well since courtesy was also one of the characteristics women needed to have in order to be ideal women. Apart from the appearance, women needed to have some other characteristics to comply with the norms of the society. Among these characteristics was learning a little mathematics as women were the ones responsible for a few calculations at home and regulating their house budgets, and even the curricula in girls' education were organized in this sense during the Victorian period. Accordingly, domestic economy was a compulsory subject for girls in the Victorian period as mentioned in the previous chapter. Accordingly, Aurora also learnt "... a little algebra, a little / Of the mathematics" (I.403-404). The concept "a little" is significant here and it is based on the belief that women have a limited brain capacity compared to men and their so-called brain capacity should be "occupied with the finer points of cooking and

sewing and dealing with tradesmen” (Paxman, 1998: 222). In order to be ideal women and entertain their future husbands and guests, Victorian women needed to learn how to dance and sing as was discussed in the previous chapter. Therefore, in her training Aurora “learnt much music” (I. 415), and she “danced the polka” (I. 424), and she “learnt cross-stitch” (I. 447). Thus, what Aurora acquired during her training by her aunt was for her future role in the domestic sphere because “a woman without the ability to handle a little music, a little drawing, and lots of needlework was considered lacking, as was a woman who was socially gauche” (Calder,1977: 117).

In her training, Aunt Leigh forces Aurora to read some books which are on womanhood and conventional roles in the society. Aurora mentions those books when she says:

I read a score of books on womanhood  
To prove, if women do not think at all,  
They may teach thinking, (to a maiden aunt  
Or else the author) – books demonstrating  
Their right of comprehending husband's talk  
When not too deep, and even of answering  
With pretty 'may it please you,' or 'so it is,'-  
(I.427-433)

Aurora gives some details about the content of those books as she says that they are about teaching women how to behave in their relationship with their husbands. By making Aurora read those books, her aunt aims to fit Aurora into an ideal wife of the future. To be sure that Aurora does her task and reads her books, her aunt supervises her, asking “Aurora, have you done / Your task this morning? – have you read that book?” (I.1036-37). Thus, she checks whether Aurora obeys her training and does her tasks to be prepared for her future position as a wife.

Even though Aurora finds it difficult to do whatever her aunt tells her, she obeys her aunt's commands because she does not want to arouse her indignation. However, she conveys her displeasure with her obedience when she says:

At first,  
I felt no life which was not patience, – did  
The thing she bade me, without heed to a thing  
Beyond it, sate in just the chair she placed,  
With back against the window, to exclude  
The sight of the great lime-tree on the lawn,  
(I.482-487)

In this quote, Aurora implies much more with the position of the chair, she is not allowed to look outside the window which symbolizes women's imprisonment at home in the Victorian period. In Aurora's lines, there is a criticism of such an isolation at her aunt's home as she says "I, alas, / A wild bird scarcely fledged, was brought to her cage" (I. 306-307). She challenges her deprivation of freedom in her aunt's home since she sets an analogy not only between herself and a trapped bird, but also between a cage and her aunt's home. Thus, once more she makes a reference to the imprisonment of girls and women with their conventional roles in the Victorian period. Aurora's strict training towards domesticity is stressed by Gilbert and Gubar when they suggest that Aurora Leigh is "initiated into torments of feminine gentility by her censorious maiden aunt, an ungentle spinster who acts (like so many women in novels by women) as patriarchy's agent in 'breeding' young ladies for decorous domesticity" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 575). From the extract by the critics, it is understood that Aurora's training in Aunt Leigh's custody is both strict and tiresome, and it is a process of raising Aurora as fit for domesticity like other young girls of the Victorian period. In this sense, Virginia Woolf also asserts, "...Aurora suffered the education that was thought proper for women. She learnt a

little French, a little algebra; ... how to draw nereids neatly draped, to spin glass, to stuff birds, and model flowers in wax” (Woolf, 1932: 224). Thus, Woolf also suggests that Aurora’s training during her youth is based on the acquisition of a good knowledge of domestic affairs which prepare women for their future roles as mothers and wives.

As mentioned above, obeying her aunt’s commands, Aurora avoids her aunt’s indignation and closer supervision and starts to read her father’s books in her spare time to develop a poetic mind. Actually, isolating herself in her room to read gives her ample freedom from her restrictive training as a girl, and eventually she becomes determined to have an unconventional life in the future as a woman. She stresses her striving for freeing herself when she says:

... I sat on in my chamber green,  
And lived my life, and thought my thoughts, and prayed  
My prayers without the vicar; read my books,  
Without considering whether they were fit  
To do me good.

(I.698-702)

Here, it is clear that reading her father’s books in her free time is her own choice and it provides her a “comparable relief from the constraints of domesticity” (Wallace, 1997: 234). In the lines above, she also implies that she frees herself in her chamber by reading what she wants, thinking with her free will and praying as she wants. In this sense, as Gilbert and Gubar assert, “Aurora refuses to submit to her aunt’s strictures; early, studying her dead father’s books, she decides to become a poet” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 575). These books are written by men especially authors of classical literature as Homer and Horace and they help her to learn the poetic tradition. Since she is not allowed to go to school to become a poet, she becomes a self-taught poet and starts to write. Thus, with her determination, she disobeys the

norms of the patriarchal society that women do not need proper education as mentioned in the previous chapter.

### 3.2 Aurora's Adulthood

Having made up her mind to be a powerful woman rather than complying with the gender roles of the patriarchal society, Aurora starts to change her ideas about gender roles. Both her life and debates on woman's nature and role in the society reflect her intention and her vision of womanhood. For instance, she is very critical about women's duty of sewing. Aurora stresses how vain it is for women when she says:

We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,  
Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir,  
To put on when you're weary—or a stool  
To tumble over and vex you

(I.456-60)

In her lines above, Aurora puts forward how redundant the sewing done by women is because it is not something which they benefit from but something for men's comfort. She also suggests that like the housework, it hinders women from doing what they want to do. In this sense, as Anne D. Wallace asserts, "Aurora's indictment of sewing as constraining, superficial, trivial, spiritually retrograde, fatal to poetic arts, and economically worthless, constitutes an indictment of women's work in every sense" (Wallace, 1997: 233). Thus, it is clear that sewing not only takes women's time as a worthless matter, but it also paradoxically hinders their creativity as they produce not for themselves but for others. In this sense, Lewis also suggests, "sewing imagery becomes an indictment of women's work as trivial, wasteful, and fatal to creativity" (Lewis, 2007: 127).

As an adult in her twenties and being very critical about women's conventional roles in the society, Aurora disagrees with her cousin Romney Leigh on

his views about women, their position and roles in the society. While questioning Romney's ideas, she indirectly criticizes Victorian men's vision of womanhood. In one of their conversations, Romney scorns women when he says:

... Women as you are,  
Mere women, personal and passionate,  
You give us donating mothers, and chaste wives.  
Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!

(II.220-223)

Here, Romney reflects a stereotypical approach to femininity: he thinks that women are to be mothers or wives and chastity is important for them. In the last line of this quote, he attributes an angelic value to women by comparing them to Madonnas and saints. Thus, his thoughts are in parallel with the belief of the Victorian patriarchal society that "the sphere of love, the emotions and domesticity was defined as the sphere of women" (Gorham, 1982: 4). Although he is a man who strives to reform the class system and set an equality between classes, his approach to genders is not different from the society he lives in. By this way, he acts as an agent of the Victorian patriarchal society because his approach to femininity is part of men's vision of womanhood..

Upon his declaration of women and their roles, Romney proposes Aurora to marry him and help him in his philanthropic activities. In her reply to him, Aurora criticizes Romney, saying:

... What you love,  
Is not a woman, Romney, but a cause:  
You want a helpmate, not a mistress, sir,—  
A wife to help your ends . . . in her no end!  
Your cause is noble, your ends excellent,

But I, being most unworthy of these and that,  
Do otherwise conceive of love.

(II.400-406)

Having understood Romney's views about women, Aurora rejects his marriage proposal, because she believes that Romney's marriage proposal is not based on love and he wants her to be his wife who will help him in his activities. Asking Aurora to marry him in a conventional sense and be a chaste wife according to the values of patriarchal society, he ignores Aurora's goals. Thus, marrying him will make Aurora a conventional Victorian woman serving her husband in the domestic sphere. However, her refusal of marriage proposal by Romney shows that she does not accept gender divisions. This is a challenge to traditional marriages of the age. Aurora says:

You misconceive the question like a man,  
Who sees a woman as the complement  
Of his sex merely. You forget too much  
That every creature, female as the male,  
Stands single in responsible act and thought  
As also in birth and death.

(II.434-439)

Actually, Aurora's refusal of marriage is an expression of strong opposition to men's approach to marriage and women. She tells Romney that he thinks in the same way with the Victorian patriarchal society and he forgets that women are not mere helpers and they have their thoughts, goals and responsibilities. Thus, her words show that she denies the conventional roles of a wife for the sake of being a powerful woman. As Gilbert and Gubar suggest, Aurora's cousin "asks her to become his wife and helpmate, she proudly declines his offer, explaining that she has her vocation, too: art, which is at least as necessary as social service" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 576).

The critics affirm how important Aurora's refusal in terms of her sex and her vocation is. Mentioning her refusal of the marriage proposal, Aurora claims, "If I married him, / I would not dare to call my soul my own" (II. 785-786). Thus, she tells that by refusing to marry her cousin, she takes an important step towards freeing her soul as an independent woman poet, and "she firmly rejects all forms of patriarchal constraint" (Martinez, 2012: 18). All in all, her reply to Romney is a criticism of Victorian marriage institution and men's conventional approach to the concept of a subservient wife.

Aurora's debate on women during her adulthood also show that those women who plan to engage with something beyond the domestic sphere may have some trouble. This is also understood for Romney's words when he says: "...keep to the green wreath / Since even dreaming of the stone and bronze / Brings headaches, pretty cousin..." (II.93-95). In the quote, the difficulty of having a career for a woman in the Victorian period is suggested through the headache metaphor. However, as a powerful woman who challenges the Victorian patriarchy even during her early years as mentioned in the previous chapter, Aurora Leigh is determined not to give up, saying

... I would rather take my part  
With God's Dead, who afford to walk in white  
Yet spread His glory, than keep quiet here,  
And gather up my feet from even a step,  
For fear to soil my gown in so much dust.  
I choose to walk at all risks.—Here, if heads  
That hold a rhythmic thought, must ache perforce,  
For my part, I choose headaches

(II.101-108).

Here, Aurora's words show her courage and determination because she clearly states that she is ready to bear any obstacle on her way towards having a career rather than



keeping quiet as a woman. She is not afraid of taking risks and getting into trouble which those women acting against the so-called ideal Victorian woman may encounter. Thus, Aurora's words reflecting her determination above "convey a metaphorical meaning that alludes to Aurora's unusual decision to become a professional writer" (Carion, 2003: 784), and this determination shows her insistence "on women's primary moral and political responsibility to engage in serious work" (Lewis, 2007: 129).

Browning also juxtaposes Aurora with other female characters in the poem to highlight Aurora's rebellious attitude towards the conventions. Aurora's aunt that was discussed in the earlier pages of this chapter is one instance. There are also figures from other classes to show that women in every class have difficulties to accomplish. One of the acquaintances Aurora encounters in her adulthood is Marian Erle whose life reflects the conditions of the lower-class women. She is a poor woman about to marry Aurora's cousin Romney. Romney seems as philanthropist trying to set equality among social classes. After he is rejected by Aurora, he decides to marry Marian which he thinks is a part of his philanthropic attitude. However, Lady Waldemar, who is an aristocrat and has feelings for Romney, tells Marian that her marriage is a pre-arranged one by her mother and she leaves on the day of the wedding after she learns the truth. She rejects what the society finds suitable for her, since marriage was considered by the Victorians as the noblest career for a woman as mentioned earlier. Then, she is raped and ends up on the streets of Paris as a prostitute with a son born. It is clear that her condition is a consequence of her refusal of a marriage which was not based on love. As Leighton asserts, "the social code of wealth, class and by implication, sex, makes Marian's life a kind wrong from the beginning" (Leighton, 1989: 112). From this quote, it is clear that the class system and approach to the genders in the Victorian period affect women, especially poor women like Marian, negatively. For her condition, Marian says:

'Mine, mine,' she said; 'I have as sure a right  
As any glad pround mother in the world,

Who sets her darling down to cut his teeth  
Upon her church-ring. If she talks of law,  
I talk of law! I claim my mother - dues  
By law, – the law which now is paramount;  
The common law, by which the poor and weak  
Are trodden underfoot by vicious men,  
And loathed for ever after by the good.

(VI. 661-669).

She expresses that she is a victim of laws in the Victorian period, and her condition displays the gender inequalities against women. Actually, she shows that in the lower class, women are more vulnerable to gender oppressions and inequalities. For Marian, Taryn Laing Cox suggests, “a victim of abuse and cruelty in both her childhood and later in her abduction and rape ... provides ... dramatic instances in the narrative to comment on the ruthless debasement of the humanity of the lower class” (Cox, 2009: 232). Briefly, Marian is a victim of oppression from infancy as a lower class girl, which shows the period’s inequalities in terms of genders and social classes.

Aurora’s encounter with Marian in Paris, after living independently in London as a poet, has significant consequences. First of all, travelling alone is another sign of Aurora’s independence as a Victorian woman. Secondly, the relationship between the two women is a sign of woman’s solidarity from two different classes. Aurora calls Marian as her sister (V. 1095). They are similar in their conditions as Aurora is not welcomed by the society because she writes poems and Marian is also excluded from the society as she rejected marrying according to the mind-set of the patriarchal society. Aurora’s determination to support Marian is a sign of her powerful side as a woman in her adulthood because she implies that two women can support one another and live without being under protection of a man. To help Marian, Aurora says:

Come, and, henceforth, thou and I  
Being still together, will not miss a friend,  
Nor he a father, since two mothers shall  
Make that up to him

(VII. 122-125)

This invitation by Aurora shows how Aurora describes herself as a second mother for Marian's son. Her description of herself as a mother is an important sign of future reconciliation between her career and femininity which is against the rules of the Victorian patriarchal society. By taking Marian with her, she "establishes a domestic unit of female partners, two mothers who stand in the place of the absent father and husband" (Rappoport, 2012: 59). Actually, such a "domestic unit" is a challenge to the values of the patriarchal society because men are seen as providers and a woman supporting herself economically is seen as hazardous for the Victorian ideals. Thus, through demonstration of Marian's condition and her determination to help Marian, Aurora displays her power as an independent woman and challenges men's mind-set in the Victorian period. All in all, as in her youth, in her adulthood Aurora questions the norms of the society she lives in. Lastly, through the life of a lower class woman and her denial of a marriage not based on love, Aurora highlights the gender inequalities women of such class face.

Browning also talks about upper class women's life in her work through Lady Waldemar, who has feelings for Romney. She plans to undermine her marriage with Marian and asks for Aurora's help. Actually, she thinks Marian is not worthy of Romney since she is a woman from lower class and she describes Romney's decision to marry Marian as "miracle" (III. 657). Here, she knows that Marian comes from humble origins and she is not suitable for Romney. Thus, she acts as an agent of "social order that victimises the Marian Erles of this world" (Rosenblum, 1983: 330). Although she undermines the marriage between Marian and Romney, she believes that marriage and domesticity are suitable for women. She reflects this in her comment about Aurora's art. She says:

... You stand outside,  
You artist women, of the common sex;  
You share not with us, and exceed us so  
Perhaps by what you're mulcted in, your hearts  
Being starved to make your heads: so run the old  
Traditions of you.

(III. 406-411)

In this quote, she implies that women choosing writing as career betray their nature and she categorizes those women as different from other women. Here, she shows that she has a common belief with Aunt Leigh and Romney in terms of women and their conventional roles. Her approach to Marian, her plan of marrying Romney whom she thinks is from her class and her discussion about women artists above show that she is a woman who behaves in line with the Victorians' view of womanhood. Despite being an aristocrat, she describes womanhood in conventional sense. Thus, Aurora not only through Marian Erle and but also Lady Waldemar highlights the conditions of women in relation to classes as mentioned earlier.

### **3.3 Aurora's Poetic Career and Marriage**

Aurora's poetic career for which she declares her purpose at the beginning of her work is still immature during the first years of her adulthood. She describes herself as a woman artist in the first years of her twenties when he says: "... I stood / Woman and artist,—either incomplete, / Both credulous of completion" (3-5). In her words, it is clear that she does not separate her femininity and art which are seen as two clashing terms in the Victorian period as discussed in the previous chapter. Although she describes both her womanhood and art as incomplete, Aurora gives the sign of her future success as a woman and poetess despite the gender inequalities in the field of poetry. Throughout her work in which she is the protagonist, she mirrors aforementioned gender inequalities of her age because she not only tells the

difficulties she bears until she becomes a poetess, but she also challenges her age and searches for social reform through writing as a woman. She values writing about her own age and claims that poets' "sole work is to represent the age/ Their age" (V. 202-203).

Through his conversation with Aurora on women and writing, Romney reflects men's approach to women's participation in poetry, saying:

Here's a book I found!  
No name writ on it—poems, by the form;  
Some Greek upon the margin,—lady's Greek  
Without the accents. Read it? Not a word.  
I saw at once the thing had witchcraft in 't,  
Whereof the reading calls up dangerous spirits:  
I rather bring it to the witch.

(II.74-80)

Here, it is clear that Romney underestimates women's poetry because when he finds a book whose writer is unknown, he thinks that it must have been written by a woman poet, so before reading it he decides that it is full of witchcraft. Just like his views about women's roles as wives, Romney reflects the patriarchal way of thinking about women and verse writing in the Victorian period. While he is talking about the book he finds, he tells how he understands that it belongs to a woman since it seems worthless. Accordingly, Alison Case asserts, "Romney here represents the whole weight of male social authority, discouraging women from writing by assuring them that anything they do will inevitably be second-rate" (Case, 1991: 24). All in all, Romney thinks that like other women, Aurora "does not have sufficient knowledge or sympathy to be a successful poet" (Rotunno, 2008: 59). Therefore, in addition to ridiculing Aurora's art, he also tries to discourage Aurora from writing when he says:

...If your sex is weak for art,  
(And I who said so, did but honour you  
By using truth in courtship) it is strong  
For life and duty...

(II.373-376)

Emphasizing his sincerity in a love relationship that women's nature is suitable for serving at home rather than writing poems, he displays men's conventional mind-set about women's writing and duties in the society.

As a consequence of this patriarchal mentality in the Victorian period, Aurora and other women encounter strict obstacles and inequalities in the formation of their poetic career because of their sex. Actually, as they cannot participate in poetry on equal terms with men, there are not many women poets, and their absence makes *Aurora Leigh* more significant as it is one of the important texts by a woman poet in the Victorian period. Aurora values women's participation in the poetry and opposes those women complying with the norms of the society as she says: "How dreary 'tis for women to sit still / On winter nights by solitary fires, / And hear the nations praising them far off" (V. 439-441). She disapproves women's behaviour according to the values of the Victorian patriarchal society. She believes that women need to pursue their goals no matter what is expected of them by patriarchy.

After her aunt's death, Aurora moves to London to pursue her aim of writing with a sum of money she inherits from her aunt. She chooses London because it was the centre for publication. By this move as a woman, she shows her determination to be an independent woman and poet. There, she tries to live on her own and write. However, her money is little and she has to support herself which would be a sign of her independence. She mentions her effort to survive, saying:

... The midnight oil  
Would stink sometimes; there came some vulgar needs:  
I had to live, that therefore I might work.

And, being but poor, I was constrained, for life,  
To work with one hand for the booksellers,  
While working with the other for myself  
And art.

(III. 299-306).

In this quotation, Aurora affirms that while she produces works that would please booksellers, she also works hard to improve her art. Thus, on the one hand, she tells in what ways she works to earn money for survival and independence, on the other hand, she values her art compared to the other works she writes for booksellers for money. As Patricia Pulham asserts, “it is significant that Aurora makes a distinction between writing for booksellers and working for herself, and art. She seeks the elevation of poetry beyond the contaminating touch of the literary marketplace” (Pulham, 2003:16). Thus, Aurora shows that she does not deviate from her aim of being a woman poet in the Victorian period and challenge gender-specific literary tradition. She underlines the fact that it is not easy for a woman to survive as a woman poet in the Victorian society, saying: “Through all the bristling fence of nights and days / Which hedges time in from the eternities, / I struggled” (III. 296-298). She conveys how she does not give up working throughout nights and days.

Despite the gender inequalities and difficulties, Aurora succeeds in establishing a poetic career upon her move to London, mainly because she has a “room of her own” (Woolf, 2012: 29), as Woolf suggests, to concentrate on her art. She says: “The room does very well; I have to write / Beyond the stroke of midnight” (III. 26-27). Accordingly, as Cora Kaplan claims, “the description of Aurora as an independent author living and working in London was possibly the most revolutionary assertion in the poem” (Kaplan, 1978:36). As an independent woman poet, Aurora completes her text *Aurora Leigh*, a work by a woman about women makes it more valuable. In her assertion below, it is clear that Helene Cixous also supports such texts which are about women as she asserts:

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies - for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement.(Cixous, 1976: 875)

*Aurora Leigh* is a good example for Cixous's argument because it is not only a poem by a woman but it also tells about women and touches upon the woman's question. Thus, it is written as a challenge to the literature under the domain of the patriarchal society because "many Victorian literary works are constructed from male vantage points in which the male narrator actually speaks" (Bycroft, 2003).

Like her poetic career, Aurora's marriage is also significant as it is different from common marriages in the Victorian period. Although Aurora seems to comply with the norms of the society by marrying Romney, her marriage is not based on the acceptance of the conventional gender roles, because her marriage is not a barrier to her poetic career. Aurora accepts Romney's proposal, which she refused earlier for the sake of becoming a poet, after she changes Romney's vision of femininity and poetry. As Romney utters:

... in this last book,  
You showed me something separate from yourself,  
Beyond you; and I bore to take it in,  
And let it draw me. You have shown me truths

(VIII. 605-608)

Romney's utterance above implies that Aurora has established a successful career and changed even a man's conventional point of view about women and writing.



Thus, Romney accepts that he has understood the truths about women whom he ridiculed earlier and criticizes his earlier behaviour as he says: “I was not worthy” (VIII. 323). He also claims:

I should push  
Aside, with male ferocious impudence,  
The world's Aurora who had conned her part  
On the other side the leaf! ignore her so,  
Because she was a woman and a queen,  
And had no beard to bristle through her song,—  
My teacher, who has taught me with a book

(VIII. 327-333).

In the lines above, Romney admits that he has ignored Aurora and her art due to her sex, and utters that this is a sign of disrespect to women. He puts away such a thought. Addressing Aurora as his teacher is an indication of the fact that Aurora succeeds in social reform through her art. Therefore, by marrying Romney, Aurora does not conform to the stereotypical roles as a Victorian woman but she shows that it is not a necessity to sacrifice either love or her art for the sake of the other. Also, she shows how important love is when she says: "art is much, but love is more" (IX.656). Womanhood and poetry are proved to be two reconcilable terms, when Aurora underlines that “it is not so much unfeminine to be a poet” (Zonana, 1989: 249). For Aurora’s marriage, Alison Case asserts, “after many misunderstandings both trivial and profound, Aurora and Romney are united, and the meaning of their lives is seen retroactively to lie in the struggle to bring art, love and social improvement into relation with each other – a struggle which achieves symbolic success in their marriage” (Case, 1991: 22). In this quote, Case also confirms that this marriage is a result of the combination of art, love and social reform, and could be accepted as a success rather than a conformity to the Victorian ideals.

Finally, in *Aurora Leigh*, the heroine narrates her adventures she experienced on her way towards being a poet in a strictly patriarchal society. In her narration of her childhood, she describes her rearing and her struggles as a young girl in the Victorian period. After her childhood, she also recounts her experiences as an adult woman and her strivings to be a poet which started in her infancy. Also, she conveys that she succeeds in establishing a poetic career despite the obstacles. Lastly, in addition to her poetic career, Aurora's marriage is also significant as it shows that wife and husband can participate in the various spheres on equal terms and it is not unfeminine to be a poet. All in all, through her childhood, adulthood, writing career and marriage, Aurora reflects the period she lives in and challenges the gender inequalities of the patriarchal society.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSION

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, was a self-taught woman poet. She learnt Greek and Latin herself, and she read the classics. She translated Aeschylus's *The Prometheus Bound*. As a woman poet, she always touched the issue of woman's question in her works such as "Lady Geraldine's Courtship", "A Romance of the Ganges", "The Romaunt of Margret" and 'The Romance of the Swan's Nest". In those works, she problematized the fixed roles attributed to women by the society. Her works were provocative to urge women to use their potentials in the society. Her narrative poem, *Aurora Leigh* which the poet defines as "the most mature of [her] works" (Browning, 1897: 228), is written with the purpose of dealing with the gender inequalities in the nineteenth century and proving women's ability to write poetry. Browning suggests that it is a work "into which [her] highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered" (Browning, 1897: 228). The poet conveys her intention of writing this narrative poem while saying that she plans to write "a poem comprehending the aspect and manners of modern life and flinching at nothing of the conventional" (quoted in Mermin, 1989: 186). Thus, she expresses that she plans to write a text showing the realities of its age and challenging the conventional applications in this age. Therefore, rather than taking the life of "a world-famous military figure as the subject of her novel poem" (Martinez, 2012: 11), Browning concentrates on "what she knew" (Martinez, 2012: 11). She deals with the woman's question in relation to the Victorian period through taking a fictional woman and her strivings as her subject. Besides concentrating on women, their rights and their participation in the literary world in her poem, she also chooses an implicative title "Aurora Leigh" for her poem. Like its content, the poem's title is significant as Aurora was the name of a mythical Roman goddess, who inspires others to do

something good. In the poem, Aurora Leigh is a character trying to write and inspire other women to write.

Aurora Leigh that has been discussed with its form and content, is known as one of the first poems to challenge the absence of women in poetry. Thus, Aurora Leigh attracts the attention of Browning's contemporaries. As Everett asserts that, Browning's poem Aurora Leigh "explains, ..., in some degree, the ardor of admiration with which she is regarded by many of the most cultivated of her own sex. She speaks what is struggling for utterance in their hearts, and they find in her poems the revelation of themselves (Everett, 1857: 419). As the quotation implies, it reflects the struggles and sufferings of women in several spheres particularly in poetry, therefore, it is also appreciated by women contemporaries of Browning, one of whom is George Eliot, who says that no other work provides "a deeper sense of communion with a large as well as a beautiful mind" (Eliot, 1954: 322).

Aurora Leigh drew the attention not only because its heroine represented the problems women faced in the 19th century, but also because it showed that the women could participate in poetry which was seen as difficult due to their so-called insufficient brain capacity and education as mentioned in the previous chapters. Thus, by showing how a woman can also write in verse on equal terms with her male contemporaries, it draws a great deal of attention. Accordingly, as Lynda Chouiten asserts, "Mrs Browning's text is a serious challenge to patriarchy not only because it is showered on its social and literary representatives, but also because by showing the ease with which the poet – a woman – handles a device long thought to be reserved to men" (Chouiten, 2012: 9). This quote also confirms how the text has been appreciated as it both reflects women in terms of their social life and literature, and it paved the way of poetry for women as it challenges the patriarchal poetic tradition in the Victorian society through writing. In this sense, Gardner Taplin states that "no other work in nineteenth-century English fiction gives more hope to the aspirations of women" (Taplin, 1979: 22).

Being one of the significant texts about woman's question, it is not surprising that the text is appreciated also by some feminist critics one of whom is Virginia Woolf. Valuing the text, Woolf suggests that "thirteen editions of Aurora Leigh had been demanded by the year 1873" (Woolf, 1932: 220). This quote by Woolf is an indication of how Aurora drew attention as woman's text in verse. This demand in high numbers reflects the popularity of Aurora Leigh and success of a woman writer. Thus, it is clear that Browning broke out of the patriarchal values of the Victorian period through her writing. In other words, through her work, she succeeded "to break out of the gendered restrictions imposed on her by a male poetic tradition" (Case, 1991:17). Here, Case lays emphasis on Aurora Leigh in terms of women's writing in literary tradition based on the values of the patriarchal Victorian society. Thus, like Virginia Woolf, she also draws attention to Aurora Leigh as one of the ground-breaking poems by a woman.

To conclude, Browning's Aurora Leigh is an important masterpiece which has importance in many terms as mentioned in the previous chapters. It is full of metaphors, implications, expressions, conversations and experiences which tell the situation of women and inequalities in terms of gender roles in the nineteenth century. Being a famous work with more than thirteen editions even in its age, it shows how women faced injustices and what they could succeed despite those injustices. For instance, it shows women's scarcity is not a result of any insufficient capacity and she "overthrows the cliché which holds that a woman's mind is incapable of roundabout turns of phrases" (Chouiten, 2012: 9). All in all, Browning employs Aurora Leigh to challenge the values of the patriarchal Victorian society through writing. Thus, it is "a unique, wonderful and immortal poem; astonishing for its combination of masculine power with feminine tenderness; for its novelty, its facility, its incessant abundance of thought, and expression; its being an exponent of its age" (Hunt, 1897: 739). From this quote, it is clear that showing its period through women from different classes – the lower-class Marian, the aristocrat Lady Waldemar, the middle class Aunt Leigh and Aurora- and also through male figures

like Aurora's father and Romney Leigh , Aurora Leigh keeps being a famous and significant masterpiece of the Victorian period in relation to woman's question.



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### HOBBIES

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