

GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Vol. 3, Issue-II (March 2014)



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Christina Rossetti: Poetry and Devotion

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The Victorian England witnessed many developments ranging from the social to the literary fields. Literature being the very reflection of society since ages continued in the nineteenth century England also as the vehicle of expression. While the scientific advancement was the trend, there were many writers who sought a subjective involvement with life owing to the growth of uncertainty and doubts and took refuge from the religious domains. Poets like Matthew Arnold saw religion as the perfect hope for sustenance and apart from him, there were many other writers who made their say whether in the form of poetry or prose and contributed to the world literary domain. An effective woman voice of the period was Christian Georgina Rossetti. Rossetti was gifted with a great lyrical quality and belonging to the lineage of Italian art, she had an expertise with regard to the imagery and symbols. In addition to this, an important aspect that her art of poetry possessed was a devotional spirit. Rossetti was a woman of faith and her relationship with God was out of this world. The following paper will attempt at bringing into limelight the devotional fervour of her poetry and the way religion acted as a solace to her granting her and her work an extraordinary capacity to sustain through ages.

Born in the nineteenth century England, Christina Georgina Rossetti exists, even today, as one of the most influential women poets in the world literature. Rossetti was the youngest child in the family and had an exceptionally happy childhood with supportive parents and equally talented siblings. As an adult, however, she grew quite restrained in character. Her personality was influenced by religion to a very large extent and the importance of her faith for life and her art can never be overstated. The most recurring themes of her poetry include the changeability of human love, the vanity of earthly love, renunciation, individual unworthiness and the perfection of divine love. Her works, however, at large are devotional in spirit. "Her peculiar originality as a religious poet lies in the fact that, unlike, the majority of religious poets, she is in no way concerned with preaching to others or moralizing for others; or dealing with the intellectual difficulties that best faith" (Rickett: 472). Rossetti's beliefs were formed in her childhood itself and she clung to them till her death. The influence of religion upon her was such that she rejected two of her lovers on religious grounds. The unfulfilled love affected her thoughts, her feelings but she never let hold of the faith that she possessed with regard to her religion. Rossetti was Anglo-catholic in her belief and strongly Puritan. The Church, the Bible and the social welfare activities constituted a chunk of her life. Her brother William Rossetti opines that religion was of a paramount concern to Christina. In fact her first poetic piece was a 'Hymn' that she had written for her mother on her birthday. Religion was the pervading spirit of her life and nothing intruded upon her religious thoughts from the very beginning of her life, religion was a hallmark of experience. Nesca Robb opines, "her religion is not simply the last

refuge of a disappointed heart; it is from the beginning a touchstone of experience, an interpreter of joy and pain alike” (1948: 108-109). In a poem, Rossetti talks about love as:

Love forever dwells in Heaven
 Hope entereth not there
 To despairing man loves given
 Hope dwells not with despair
 Love reigneth high and reigneth low
 And reigneth everywhere

(Rossetti: 82)

To her, divine love was all pervading and the only ever-lasting refuge one had in the ephemeral world.

The Victorian times witnessed an important explosion of a religious movement known as The Oxford Movement which was essentially a revolt against the dangerous anti-religious elements in the society which included the lazy churchmanship. Like many others, Christina was also convinced that Oxford Movement was something much more than a mere religious revival and she arose as an adamant supporter to it granting her religious practices a catholicity. She, herself, was neither a visionary nor a mystic poet but was a devoted member of the Church of England. She believed that church was the dwelling place of the spirit of God upon earth and that she owed it all the honour within her bounds (Zaturenska: 233). Much of her devotional work, therefore, was the expression of her own individuality marked with sincerity, fervour and pure devotion. Her poems were an expression of her subjectivity which reflect the surrender of her inner self to her God. In fact, her poems bring into limelight the personal relationship that she shared with God, the relation of complete surrender. She says:

I take my heart in my hand
 O my god, o my god
 My broken heart in my hand
 Thou has seen judge thou
 My hope was written on sand
 O my god o my god
 Never let thy judgement stand
 Yea judge me now
 I take my heart in my hand
 I shall not die, but live
 All that I have I bring
 All that I am I give

(Rossetti: 366)

Rossetti, in the above lines, presents herself before her god with an openness of character and strength of faith. She pleads to be judged and her surrender to His will accepted. Like a typical mystic, she surrenders herself before the larger Self and requests submergence into that. She found her refuge in God only. According to C M Bowra, “only in God could she find a finally

satisfying object for the abounding love which was the mainspring of her life and character” (1949: 270). She says in a poem:

There god shall join and no man part
I full of Christ and Christ of me

(Rossetti:192)

She sought a world other than the transient world and gave a space to it through her poetry. She felt this world to be nothing at times and then found herself comforted by a divine voice which called to her and sustained her amidst of the chaos. Darkness took hold of her and then, she would be illumined by a divine presence. She talks about it as:

Yea, I have sought thee, yea I have found thee
Yea, I have thirsted for thee
Yea, long ago with loves hands I bound thee
Now the Everlasting Arms surround thee
Through death’s darkness I look and see
And clasp thee to Me

(Barua: 123-124)

There is an eternal thirst for Union with God in Rossetti’s poems. And at many places, her words explicitly reveal the pain of separation that she suffered from. From the darkness of night she strives to arrive at the state of rapture, oneness and an inseparable union from the Divine. Her faith was very demanding. She had set severe standards for herself with regard to her religion. The god of her faith demanded full service of the soul and she, willingly offered herself at the service of her Lord. She had no objections in yielding her spirit in the service of her religion, her God because she had understood it as being more reliable than the world of body. Her poems are very intense in their feelings. Rossetti was uncomplicated in expressing her feelings. The central theme always remained the love of God and her poetry records the utmost feelings of despair, longing, anguish and unhappiness. In her poem, *The Thread of Life*, she discusses God as somebody who had given His Self to her and provided her with the spirit to live saying:

I give to Him who gave Himself for me
Who gives Himself to me and bids me sing

(Barua: 135)

She after suffering failures in the worldly love composed herself back through Divine love. In fact, she regarded the affair of marriage as futile for it didn’t offer her the stability which the spiritual realm did. She had drawn it clear that married love had no space in her life and that she had an everlasting allegiance with the Divine. That is why she always turned at the beginning as well as the end to her God who was her refuge. Hers was a Divine world where everything that existed was heavenly. Many of her poems bring in the symbolic elements like paradise, angels, child, shepherds and many others. She discusses “Paradise” as a place where:

I hope to see these things again
 But not as once in dreams by night
 To see them with my very sight
 And touch and handle and attain
 To have all heaven beneath my feet
 for narrow way that once they trod
 to have my part with all the saints
 and with my God

(Rossetti: 180)

The religious imagery in her poems is very vivid. She makes one see and feel the heavenly elements before one's eyes. Her poems exist as descriptive as well as the devotional masterpieces. In the poem, holy innocents, she beautifully describes a baby, symbolic of divine innocence, sleeping and being guarded by holy angels. The angels are portrayed as guardians protecting the child from all evil spirits and the Christ, himself, she says:

The shepherd of the sheep
 In perfect love has found thee (child)

(Rossetti: 309)

Apart from the religious imagery, an important aspect of Rossetti's devotional poetry was her recurring thought of repentance and self accusation. Being an adamant believer, she would always seek forgiveness and atonement for her sins. She was well aware of the human nature and its tendency to sin. As mentioned earlier also, hers was a stern faith, which didn't allow her to do anything unlawful but she still took care not to transgress the religious bounds. In spite of that, her confessional tone with regard to herself being a sinner strikes the central thought of many of her poems. Many of her poems have the underlying and at times very bluntly confessed thoughts like:

My god, my god, have mercy on my sin
 For it is great and if I should begin
 To tell it all, the day would be too small
 To tell it in
 My god, thou wilt have mercy on my sin

(Barua:132)

At another place, she confesses:

Lord, I confesse my sin is great;
 Great is my sinne

(Barua: 133)

She considered herself as a normal human being prone to mistakes but her faith in her Lord was such that she knew His was a merciful nature too and therefore, came back to Him knowing that she would be forgiven. She adopted a very humble, servile tone while reproaching her God and expressed everything to Him through her poetry including the thoughts of guilt and sin. Nesca Robb comments:

She has a consciousness of the fragility of the earthly things and of the tragic possibilities of life that sorts oddly with her experience. That had its origin too no doubt in her religious background, with its emphasis on human sinfulness and its consequences, temporal and eternal, but here naturally introspective and tender conscience was quick to make vision of things her own.

(1948: 84)

For Rossetti, God was a larger than life reality. He was everything to her, a father, a support, a lover in whose Divine gaze every worldly calamity including sins disappeared. To her, all that mattered was His love and her poems are replete with the fullness of her faith. She carried within herself a desire to go higher and reach the Ultimate. In her poem *Uphill*, she presents the readers with a world that requires a full, zealous and wholesome approach to be reached. She depicts a curiosity to know what lies beyond the ephemeral world and what does it require to reach the real world of spirituality. The poems begins with a question, an uncertainty as to where the road goes but ends with a composed answer and a solace that none of the travelers will remain unattended. She says:

Does the road wind uphill all the way?

And towards the end, in the poem she says:

They will not keep you standing at the door

Of labour you shall find the sum...

The world of spirituality, therefore, existed as a world of hope for Rossetti which she throughout her life banked upon. Her works are emblematic of her religious thoughts and her introspective spirit.

Rossetti's achievement lies in her exploration of the inner recesses of mind. Her grasp on her religion was absolute to the extent that it completely absorbed her life. She possessed an ability to see what was invisible to the corporeal eye. This made her transcend nearly all the material bounds and arrive at a destination par the worldly claustrophobic atmosphere. Everything that she engaged with was shaped by her religious beliefs. Her poetry offers a possibility of harmonizing worldly and heavenly love and what she highlighted through her poetry was the limited, uncertain and improper understanding of life that man had. She reinforced the doctrine of Divine love and wanted every human being to realize the essence of existence which lay in adopting the path towards God. Her poetry contains an eternal appeal for those who want a space for the Real to come out. Those who feel weighed down by the worldly clutches can take refuge in Rossetti's domain and emerge out blessed eternally.

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