

## A CULTURAL MATERIALIST READING OF *AURORA LEIGH* BY ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

Ecevit BEKLER<sup>1</sup>

### *Abstract*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, written in the Victorian period, deals with gender issue in the nineteenth century. *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning's longest poem, is in the form of epic poem and written in verse novel. The title of the poem bears the name of the narrator of the poem, and the protagonist serves as the mouthpiece of the poet Barrett Browning, a leading literary figure in the Victorian period. Aurora, as a woman, tries to position women in poetry writing, which was once considered to be written only by men, and thus wants to represent them not as an inferior gender but as equal to man. In order to reveal the women's issue within a social, political, economic and historical context and complex power structures, cultural materialism has been used as a theory.

**Keywords:** Barret Browning, Aurora Leigh, Gender issue, Cultural materialism, Ideology.

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Dicle Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Batı Dilleri ve Edebiyatları Bölümü İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı, ebekler@dicle.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-7080-6267.

## ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'İN *AURORA LEIGH* ADLI ÇALIŞMASININ KÜLTÜREL MATERYALİST AÇIDAN İNCELENMESİ

### Öz

Elizabeth Barrett Browning'in Viktorya döneminde yazdığı *Aurora Leigh*, on dokuzuncu yüzyılda toplumsal cinsiyet konusunu ele alır. Barrett Browning'in en uzun şiiri olan *Aurora Leigh*, epik şiir biçiminde ve manzum roman tarzında yazılmıştır. Şiirin adı, şiirin anlatıcısının adını taşımakta ve baş kahramanı, Viktorya döneminin önde gelen edebi şahsiyetlerinden şair Barrett Browning'in sözcülüğünü yapmaktadır. *Aurora*, bir kadın olarak, bir zamanlar yalnızca erkekler tarafından yazıldığı düşünülen şiir yazımında kadını konumlandırmaya çalışır ve bu nedenle kadını aşağı bir cinsiyet olarak değil, erkekle eşit olarak temsil etmek ister. Kadın sorununu toplumsal, siyasal, ekonomik ve tarihsel bağlamda ve karmaşık güç ilişkileri içerisinde ortaya çıkarmak için bir teori olarak kültürel materyalizm kullanılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Barret Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, Toplumsal cinsiyet sorunu, Kültürel materyalizm, İdeoloji.

### INTRODUCTION

*Aurora Leigh* (1856), as a narrative poem, is an example of nineteenth-century women creativity in literature and suggests that women are equal to men intellectually, though not necessarily physically. It subverts the patriarchal ideology by the resistance of *Aurora* and presents the power struggle between her and the capitalist male order. *Aurora*'s logical defiance against the traditional social order subverts the male-dominant discourse. It is a society's dominant culture that imposes its values on all of the society. "[T]he dominant culture at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture" (Williams, 1977, p. 114). Thus feminism was born out of the oppressive power of patriarchal societies in order to achieve gender equality. This study examines *Aurora Leigh* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning through cultural materialism and reveals that *Aurora* challenges the gender hierarchy and dominant capitalism created by the patriarchal ideology. Dollimore describes ideology as "beliefs which serve to perpetuate a particular social formation or power structure" and "the very terms in which we perceive the world" (2010, p. 9).

Cultural materialism, as a part of cultural studies, emerged in the 1980s in England along with its counterpart new historicism, which was established by the American scholar and literary historian Stephen Greenblatt. The term was coined by the British cultural theorist and literary critic Raymond Williams, who is considered a canonical figure in cultural studies. The concept 'materialist' refers to cultural artifacts, institutions, and practices, which are regarded as materialist processes, and its culturalist side assumes that there is no crude material reality beyond culture. Developed as a critical term by Raymond Williams, this approach is implicitly related to Marxism (Payne & Barbera, 2010, p. 162). By focusing on the marginalized groups

in society, cultural materialism brings a wider perspective of analysis compared to traditional Marxism that follows a class-based analysis.

Two other representatives of cultural materialism, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, edited a book titled *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* that was published in 1985. The book contains a collection of essays on Shakespeare and his cultural, political and ideological milieu. Approaching culture from an anthropological perspective on the life of a people, Williams considered culture as involving “their collective practices, beliefs, social customs, political values and forms of expression” (Brannigan, 1998, p. 95). “[H]e influenced Sinfield and Dollimore, and contributed to the *Political Shakespeare* anthology which could be said to have launched cultural materialism” (p. 36). The materialist part of cultural materialism, however, was about how it was produced. “...Williams’s cultural materialism had been concerned with the connections between social class and a collectively emancipatory politics...” (Milner, 2002, p. 154).

In the foreword to *Political Shakespeare*, Dollimore and Sinfield outline the main principles of cultural materialism by drawing attention to the importance of “a combination of historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis” (Dollimore & Sinfield, 1994, p. vii). For cultural materialists, texts must be evaluated within their social, economic, and political context since lives, social roles, and identity construction are affected by materialism and economic conjunctures prevalent in society. According to cultural materialism, literary criticism is not neutral. “Cultural materialism seeks to discern the scope for dissident politics of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation, both within texts and in their roles in cultures” (Sinfield, *Faultlines*, 1992, pp. 9-10). Emanating from the principle of political commitment, it focuses on marginalised groups, and women issue is one of areas of the interest for their literary criticism in literary works.

Brannigan states that while the liberal political beliefs and practices of post-war Britain were eroded by the new right-wing ideologies of Thatcherism, literary critics like Dollimore and Sinfield scrutinised how literary texts played their part in sustaining and perpetuating conservative ideologies. Sinfield has shown that Shakespeare has been used to teach reactionary social norms for the justification of the imperialist ideology, but Sinfield has, in return for this, provided dissident readings of Shakespeare's texts which challenge traditional conservative and humanist readings (1998, p. 97).

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Cultural materialists make use of power relations defined by the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault. Foucault, along with Williams, contributed to the emergence of cultural materialism. His theories on power, as part of power relations in cultural materialism, will thus be applied as well to the analysis of the narrative poem. For Foucault power is “the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them” (Foucault, 1978, p. 92). Power is exercised everywhere and it is not limited with one person or group since it cannot be possessed. It functions throughout the society.

### 1. ANALYSIS OF *AURORA LEIGH*

*Aurora Leigh* is a poem of nine books written in blank verse by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. It tells about the life of Aurora Leigh, the eponymous female protagonist, and her views on being an artist, gender issue, and social works. It starts with the childhood of Aurora and finishes with her marriage to Romney Leigh, her cousin. Born as the daughter of an English father and Italian mother, she is sent to England at the age of thirteen to live with her aunt after she loses her parents. Her aunt aims at raising her as a woman in accordance with conventional practices. At the age of twenty, Aurora gets a marriage proposal from Romney but rejects this, and just because of this her aunt chastises Aurora for rejecting him, and Romney inherits all of the Leigh Hall after her aunt dies. Romney wants to give some money to Aurora, but she does not accept that since she wants to earn her life and make a career as a poet in London. In the meantime, Romney makes a plan of marriage with a lower-class woman called Marian Erle. However, Lady Waldemar, an upper-class woman who wants to marry Romney, arranges her own maid to take Marian to Australia. Instead, Marian is taken to France, she gets drugged and raped, at the end of which she gives birth to an illegitimate child. Aurora sees Marian in Paris by chance and helps her. She takes her and her child to Florence. After some time, Romney, who has become blind due to a workers' revolt at his estate, appears in Florence and proposes again to Marian. In the end, Aurora declares her love to Romney, and they marry each other.

This lengthy narrative poem has become a significant literary work for feminist critics dealing with the Victorian women writers since it deals with Aurora's struggle to get women involved in professional life. This is the story of a woman who from her childhood observes the conditions of women in Victorian period and defies the capitalism and ideology constructed by a male-dominated society. Aurora, at the beginning of the poem, states that she has written a

lot in prose and verse and expresses that she “will write now for [hers]” (*AL*<sup>2</sup>, I, p. 163). She is announcing that she is going to tell in detail the matters that concern her and her gender. She states that women’s role has already been determined. They know how to raise children, “of tying sashes” and “fitting baby-shoes” (*AL*, I, p. 165). In the nineteenth century, women were expected to fulfil their role of doing household chores, raising children, and serve their husbands.

Referring to her aunt in England, she describes her as a woman with conventional roles. Her aunt’s personality has been shaped according to the dominant ideology that presents “[a] harmless life” but “a virtues life” for her aunt. Aurora regards her aunt’s life as “quiet”, however, “not life at all”. She further likens this sort of life to be “born in a cage” (*AL*, I, p. 175). She thus undermines the power and authority of the patriarchal order. Foucault dwells on the issue and function of power, and forms of resistance against power by giving the examples of “opposition to the power of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over the population, of administration over the ways people live” and considers all these as struggles that “underline everything which makes individuals truly individual” (1982, pp. 780-781). Aurora represents a woman who resists the power of men over women in Foucauldian terms. “Cultural materialists ... look for ways in which defiance, subversion, dissidence, resistance, all forms of political opposition, are articulated, represented and performed...[They] set out to explore the historical *and* the contemporary possibilities for subversion” (Brannigan, 1998, p. 108).

According to cultural materialism, all societies can be divided into infrastructures, structures, and superstructures, which make up the three components that exist in communities. The infrastructure, which consists of natural and cultural elements, has modes of production and reproduction that include technology, work patterns, birth rates, death rates, density of population and so on. The structure consists of domestic and political economy such as modes of family, gender and age roles, modes of political organization, and warfare. Finally, the superstructure consists of ideological and behavioural patterns such as religion, science, art, music, dance literature, sports, and rituals (“Cultural Materialism,” 1997). For cultural materialists, these are the driving forces that develop the culture.

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<sup>2</sup> Barrett Browning, E. (1991). *Aurora Leigh by Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. (M. Reynolds, Ed.). Ohio University Press.

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*Aurora Leigh* is replete with Biblical allusions. Even when describing her aunt, Aurora uses religious elements such as “Christian” and “church” (*AL*, I, p. 177). Act of churchgoing was common in Victorian period poetry. However, there were some who refused to accept all of the doctrines imposed by the church. There were Dissenters, who thought and practised differently from the established church. “The best-known Victorian poets from dissenting backgrounds were Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who did write against the Church and support dissenting chapel-going to some extent, but usually, in their poetry at least, subtly and ambiguously” (Blair, 2013, p. 772).

In the Victorian period, a popular image for women was created through a poem titled *The Angel in the House* by the poet Coventry Patmore, who had written the poem for his wife. The poem saw the ideal woman as being submissive, feminine, and powerless. By saying that she “read a score of books on womanhood” (*AL*, I, p. 180), Aurora reveals the attempt by her aunt to get her to be educated in a conventional way so that Aurora can be an angel in the house. Aurora rebels against the traditional role and household chores determined for women: “We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight”. Women sew a lot and naturally ruin their eyesight, which is a hindrance for them to read. After all, they are paid “[t]he worth of [their] work”, which seems useless for men (*AL*, I, pp. 181-182). Not only Romney as a man but also Aurora’s aunt as a woman represents the dominant patriarchal ideology of the period as Aurora says, “She liked a woman to be womanly” (*AL*, I, p. 181) which means many women were a part of the ideology and contributed to the confinement of their own gender. Foucault claimed that subjects are produced through power relations in a given society. Concepts such as normal and abnormal and what they refer to are designed according to societal standards. Power produces social values. “In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (1995, p. 194).

She describes her life when she begins to live with her aunt in England. She has a chamber to do as much reading as she wants. She stresses the poets’ responsibilities, discusses their nature, and claims that they are “[t]he only speakers of essential truth” and are opposed to “temporal truths” (*AL*, I, p. 197). Poetry has a special place among literary genres for her. “...*Aurora Leigh* consistently professes a literary hierarchy in which poetry “Is” above all other forms of art” (LaPorte, 2011, p. 52).

In *Aurora Leigh*, with its abundance of allusions to literary works, Aurora uses the words, “We’ll live, Aurora! we’ll be strong./The dogs are on us - but we will not die” (*AL*, I, p. 205).

Aurora, using the first-person plural in the name of all women who suffer from gender discrimination, defies the repression imposed on them by the hegemony.

At the beginning of Book Two, Aurora still sees herself “incomplete” both as a “[w]oman and artist” (*AL*, II, p. 209) since she is in her twenties. The poem can be regarded as staging the development of a woman to maturity. During their first meeting in Book Two, Aurora and Romney are in conflict with each other. Romney does not think that a woman can also be a poet, which is an established belief separating a woman poet from entering a poetic tradition dominated by men. Romney argues that “Men and women make/The world, as head and heart make human life” (*AL*, II, pp. 213-215). He suggests that while head or intelligence is a male trait, heart or emotion is a female trait. Moreover, Romney assumes a misogynistic attitude towards Aurora when he says, “We get no Christ from you, - and verily/We shall not get a poet, in my mind” (*AL*, II, p. 219). Romney questions the potential and talent of women to be great writers. He regards women as beings that cannot exceed their capacity.

Romney wants to convince Aurora by saying “If your sex is weak for art,/ it is strong/ For life and duty” (*AL*, II, p. 225). He does not see women worth of creating art and being artists. He wants Aurora to accept his marriage proposal and contribute to his social project. Aurora replies: “What you love,/Is not a woman, Romney, but a cause:/You want a helpmate, not a mistress, sir” (*AL*, II, p. 226). Aurora does not want to be in an inferior position to Romney just because he has plans to reform humanity. Aurora uses her intelligence in such a way that she does not let men like Romney inflict power on her. The nineteenth-century patriarchal order deprived women of their free will by giving them the prescribed role of *the angel in the house*, who took care of their children by doing household chores.

The marriage institution itself reinforced the hegemonic ideology that defined the gender roles by degrading women to assets that belonged to men. Mill harshly criticises the society for treating women as inferior beings and demands equal rights for women stressing that women and men are equal. Mill himself sees marriage as an institution that enslaves women legally: “Marriage is the only actual bondage known to our law. There remain no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house” (Mill, 1984, p. 323).

Love and art are inseparable for Aurora. Being a married woman alone will not make Aurora free and happy. That’s why she accuses Romney of being married to his social theory. Aurora rejects the traditional view on gender and blames Romney on “see[ing] a woman as the

complement/Of his sex merely” (*AL*, II, p. 227). Romney, like other men in the society, tries to domesticate Aurora and take her away from her ideals. Aurora’s reaction is so strong in expressing that “every creature, female as the male,/Stands single in responsible act and thought/As also in birth and death” (*AL*, II, pp. 227-228). Aurora sees the woman as equal to the man and takes a tough stance by assuming a manly attitude. Similarly, Barrett Browning praises the intellectual women. The English social theorist “Harriet Martineau is consistently praised by Barrett Browning for the “male” qualities of her mind...” (David, 1985, p. 114).

*Aurora Leigh* suggests a change in the traditional gender roles. Although power is exerted by the patriarchal order over women, the resistance displayed by Aurora aims at overthrowing it. Foucault thinks “[w]here there is power, there is resistance” (1978, p. 95). And it is through resistance that power relations can change. Contrary to the majority of the women of her time, Aurora develops a discourse that violates the untouchable patriarchal discourse by showing that women can be as successful as men in literary and intellectual life. Aurora is not a passive woman, neither is she the angel of the house.

Addressing her cousin Romney, who wants to ameliorate social issues such as poverty and class differences, Aurora reminds him of the importance of “a poet’s individualism” against his material aims. “It takes a soul,/To move a body: it takes a high - souled man,/To move the masses” (*AL*, II, p. 229). It is individual and high souls that make up a society. “[T]he passage from *Aurora Leigh* just cited optimistically envisions a harmonious soul politic, implying that a just (and therefore morally good) society can only be built by just, humane souls” (Saville, 2017, p. 10).

After her aunt’s death, Aurora moves to London to earn her living as an independent woman. For the nineteenth-century women, it was not easy to abandon their house since they were financially bound either to their husbands or their fathers, which deprived them of economic freedom. From the past to the present, money has had the power of equipping individuals with the authority of subduing those in lower classes and inferior. Marx and Engels believe in the power of money in capitalist societies. “By possessing the *property* of buying everything, by possessing the property of appropriating all objects, *money* is thus the *object* of eminent possession. The universality of its *property* is the omnipotence of its being. It, therefore, functions as the almighty being” (1988, p. 136).

In London she earns her living by writing works for “cyclopaedias, magazines” and “weekly papers” (*AL*, III, p. 273). Though, she sees high-minded verse above prose. Aurora wants to transcend the border that confines women to the domestic world. Peterson expresses that Barrett

Browning challenged the cultural assumptions that identified the domestic verse as a feminine domain (2007, pp. 55-56).

By earning her living as a poet in London, Aurora attempts to take women into the world of business, get them to gain power by earning money on their own and thus attain their economic independence. Aurora achieves recognition to some extent during her stay in London. Initially, Romney wants a wife that will help his social schemes. As a man having money, Romney thinks he can control Aurora and convince her into marriage. As a man devoted to social works and the betterment of society, he even made speeches in the Commons on social issues, “[o]f wicked women and penitentiaries” (*AL*, III, p. 285) in order to gain extensive support for his fight against what he saw as the evils of the age. However, Aurora rejects the marriage proposal and prefers instead to live alone in London and earn her living by writing poetry. This she does because she wants to assert her individuality.

It is the institutions in a society that determine the future of individuals. Marian Erle becomes a victim of social conditions in her society. She was almost sold to a wealthy local man by her mother. Although she belonged to the lower class, Romney wanted to marry her so that she could help him. However, she is raped in a brothel in Paris. She gets help from Aurora and devotes herself to her child without seeing marriage to Romney as something that will save her life. Marian Erle, the lower-class woman, is described as the “daughter of the people” (*AL*, III, p. 294).

Aurora becomes a protector for Marian Erle and takes her and her child to Italy with herself. She becomes a voice for Marian, who would otherwise have no opportunity of representation of her class. Although Marian was a virtuous woman, she became a victim of the conditions of her society. Prostitution was not a topic to be discussed by decent people, though Barrett Browning became a voice for them by giving place to the life of Rose Bell (*AL*, III, p. 298) besides Marian’s. Marian suffered a lot as a child. In her early years, her mother sold her to a man (*AL*, III, p. 310). Regarding power over sex, Foucault emphasizes that it operates from top to bottom in an “endlessly reproduced mechanisms of law, taboo, and censorship: from state to family, from prince to father...” (1978, p. 84).

Barrett Browning emphasizes that poetry must be personal as well as emotional. Blair states that Barrett Browning knew that the heart was frequently gendered female and the rhetoric of the heart, as Barrett Browning repeatedly demonstrates in her *Aurora Leigh*, is difficult to

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separate from wider discourses of nationalism, politics, the gendered body in society, and the role of poetry (2006, pp. 20,118).

Maria, in a conversation with Aurora, discusses the marriage proposal by Romney. She argues that if marriage be a contract, “[c]ontracting parties should be equal, just” (*AL*, IV, p. 319). Marian thus subverts the Victorian period marriage customs. However, unlike Aurora, Marian vows to be the handmaid and the wife of her husband when she marries. She declares she will “[s]erve tenderly, and love obediently” (*AL*, IV, pp. 320-321). Marian has already accepted to be subjugated in marriage affairs. Marian writes a letter to Romney, who is waiting for the wedding. She addresses him as “saint” and never wants him to think her “vile”. Marian thinks she does not deserve to be his wife and does not go to the wedding (*AL*, IV, pp. 346-347).

Aurora asks men to treat her and other women nobly and honour them with truth (*AL*, V, p. 363). She wants to be judged as a poet, not praised. She expresses that although critics claim that epics have died out, she does not believe that (*AL*, V, p. 365). Attributing the air of epic into her lengthy poem, she takes the role of men for the writing of poetry and thus wants to penetrate the public sphere. For her, every age is heroic, and epic poetry exists in the present as well.

The identity of a woman is constructed in society. Sir Blaise emphasizes some important criteria in choosing a wife. Women are expected to act morally and the role of women is attributed by fathers: “Our fathers chose, - and therefore, when they had hung/Their household keys about a lady's waist,/The sense of duty gave her dignity” (*AL*, V, p. 386). Foucault counts women among those deprived of power in the order of sexuality while men, along with adults, parents, and doctors, are in the category of people having power. And he further explains that those who have power have the right to know while those deprived of power are forced to remain ignorant (1978, p. 99).

Aurora remembers her father’s chiding when she was a child, which reveals the ideological structure forming the spheres separating genders between fathers and mothers. The pressed iris flower inserted by Aurora within the philosophy book only gets the disapproval of her father, which shows the gendered hierarchy of knowledge in the Victorian period: “Silly girls,/Who plant their flowers in our philosophy/To make it fine, and only spoil the book!” (*AL*, V, p. 407). Women’s socially constructed inferiority and their marginalisation stemmed from the ideological nature of the nineteenth-century Victorian period England. However, she feels the maternal spirit when she goes back to Italy. She envisions “sleeping mothers” (*AL*, V, p. 408) feeling the suck of the baby. She feels a desire to be united with her mother. “EBB took pride

in declaring her republican sympathies long before she moved to Italy, and indeed did so all through her writing career” (Saville, 2017, p. 31). Even when in Paris, Aurora observes the city with its artistic features and concludes that the artists there are “idealists” (*AL*, VI, p. 413).

Barret Browning is trying to reveal the uselessness of ideological gender discrimination and separation of spheres, which was felt to a great extent through dialectical opposition in Victorian England: “Philosopher against philanthropist,/Academician against poet, man/Against woman, against the living, the dead” (*AL*, VI, p. 420). “...Browning here acknowledges that the philosopher-poet and the prosaic philanthropist ultimately betray the fact that they are both reliant on ideological mystification to proceed” (Felluga, 2007, p. 178).

In *Aurora Leigh* discussions on the poet’s duties, intellectual oppression on women created by the patriarchal ideology and social issues are conveyed to the readers through dialogues. Aurora discusses the creativity of women, and there are times when Aurora debates social evils such as prostitution to put forward the hypocrisy of the society and the so-called philanthropy. Marrian, who is left with her illegitimate son, demands her maternal rights with a loud voice in a corrupt and hypocrite society. “I claim my mother-dues/By law” she says “by which the poor and weak/Are trodden underfoot by vicious men” (*AL*, VI, p. 434). She expresses that the poor and the weak people like her suffer, and yet she is determined to carry out her duty as a responsible mother for her son.

Aurora and Romney meet on the grounds of espousing equality. While Aurora defends the equality of genders, Romney develops plans for the betterment of the whole society. He even proposes to a lower-class woman, Marian Erle, due to his socialist ideals. That’s why Marian, referring to class differences, says “[Romney]was set to wed me, to espouse my class” and he would suffer when his class “[t]urned shoulder on him for a shameful match” (*AL*, VI, pp. 447-448).

Marian tells Aurora how a miller’s wife took her and provided shelter for her while in Paris. However, when she learned that she was pregnant without marriage, the mistress accused her of not being a “reputable girl” (*AL*, VII, p. 458). Aurora likens Lady Waldemar to “the Lamia-woman”, a half-woman and half-snake monster in mythology, because she designed everything for the fall of Marian, and accuses Romney of selling himself to Lady Waldemar with his engagement to her (*AL*, VII, p. 462). Aurora sees women like Lady Waldemar and their

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enchanting power on idealist men such as Romney as an obstacle on the way to gender equality, and implies that individuals should reform their souls.

Obedience, different from conformity or compliance, refers to the social influence by an authority figure on subjects yielding to orders. In the Victorian era, married women were expected to be obedient to their husbands. In her letter to Lady Waldemar, Aurora mentions that she already knows what trap she set up for Marian and since she is going to marry Romney, she charges her “be his faithful and true wife” and when he speaks, “be quick with [her] obedience” (*AL*, VII, p. 470). Aurora does not defend being wholly obedient to a husband. However, she thinks an evil woman such as Lady Waldemar should be confined to the cliché of ideal woman defined by patriarchy so that Lady Waldemar can at least be harmless.

In the meantime, Aurora believes that Romney is married to the aristocratic woman Lady Waldemar, only to find Romney in front of her house on a summer evening. In Book Eight Aurora and Romney have a long conversation. They both confess their mistakes and failures to each other. Romney reminds Aurora of her words for him. Aurora, in Book Two, had told him about the importance of the poet’s individualism to achieve his social ends and that his Fouriers had failed since they were “not poets enough to understand/’That life develops from within’ (*AL*, VIII, p. 523).

In her letters to her friends, Barrett Browning clearly states her opinion regarding Socialism and Fourier. Emphasizing the importance of individuality, she thinks if Fourierism<sup>3</sup> could be realised, human nature would be desecrated and dishonoured since Socialism imposed conformity and undermined the genius. She regards liberty as an indispensable part of her life and expresses that she hates Socialism (qtd. in Houston, 2013, p. 95).

Combining the work ethics with Christian teachings, Aurora states that “[t]he honest earnest man must stand and work,/The woman also, - otherwise she drops/ At once below the dignity of man,/Accepting serfdom. Free men freely work” (*AL*, VIII, p. 533). Romney is now coherent with gender politics of Aurora, and they share a common ground for the freedom of both men and women based on equal conditions of work. Aurora equates earning money with gaining her independence, which enables her to enter the public sphere dominated by men. Referring to the power of money, Marx and Engels mention its *overturning* power both against the individual

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<sup>3</sup> A communistic system for the reorganization of society devised by Charles Fourier (1772-1837), a French author. Under it the population was to be grouped in phalansteries, or socialistic groups of about 1.800 persons, who would live together as one family and hold property in common (“Fourierism,” 1984)

and against the bond of society, and stress that it transforms a lot of things such as servant into master and idiocy into intelligence (1988, p. 140).

Aurora, already independent in her inner world, attempts to subvert the conventional role defined for women by entering the world of poetry and becoming an artist. While doing that, she does not surrender her mind to the patriarchal ideology that manages the finance and gives power to men, thus rendering them powerful compared to women. “Within feminist essays of the late nineteenth century, the figure of Aurora Leigh shifts the focus from economic theory to personal narrative and, in so doing, draws on that aspect of literary representation that converts a story of individual (economic) experience into a project of universal identification” (Dalley, 2006, p. 539).

Women were considered objects without free will and men with their superiority due to their place in the public sphere and economic status were the representatives of the patriarchal world constructed culturally. Foucault, did not see a universal measure in factors that constructed the values in different societies in different times since it was “the ideology of the dominant class, which determined what it was 'right' or 'not right' ” (Foucault, 1980, p. 3). Regarding ideology, Dollimore and Sinfield express that it is composed of those beliefs, practices and institutions which work to legitimate the social order by the process that presupposes that there are others, subordinate classes, who far from sharing the interests of the dominant class are in fact being exploited by that class (2005, pp. 213-214).

To the end of the epic poem, Romney confesses that the socialists he trusted turned out to be ineffectual and did not contribute to the people. During their conversation, Aurora learns from Romney that Leigh Hall was burnt, and Romney’s social plans failed (*AL*, VIII, p. 541). Comparing Aurora with Romney, it can be said that Romney takes lessons from his ambitions and plans regarding a better society in a painful way. While it seems his scheme for this is based on his reason and intellectual approach, Aurora’s attitude regarding life and social issues is based on heart and emotions. Aurora had already questioned Romney’s large-scale scheme to social works, but he ignored her ideas, which resulted in the burn down of Leigh Hall and the failure of his idealism. In the end, Romney understands that he alone cannot do much to better the society and if he has “love” in his life, which Aurora needs as well, he can accomplish his plans more easily.

Aurora confesses that she was also wrong regarding love and says: “Art is much, but love is more./Art symbolises heaven, but Love is God/And makes heaven” (*AL*, IX, p. 577). Thus, she sublimes “love” and stresses that success or good reputation without love is not enough. *Aurora Leigh* infers from the union of Aurora and Romney that everything will change for the better:

The world's old,  
 But the old world waits the time to be renewed,  
 Toward which, new hearts in individual growth  
 Must quicken, and increase to multitude  
 In new dynasties of the race of men;  
 Developed whence, shall grow spontaneously  
 New churches, new economies, new laws  
 Admitting freedom, new societies  
 Excluding falsehood. HE shall make all new.' (*AL*, IX, p. 587)

The end of *Aurora Leigh* bears some striking similarities with the end of *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë. At the end of *Jane Eyre*, Mr. Rochester becomes blind in the fire. Despite this, Jane Eyre, who never showed weakness in her virtue or morality, or asked for money she did not deserve, marries Mr. Rochester, which shows the power of a woman. Despite inheriting a huge amount of money from her uncle John, Jane decides to marry Rochester, a needy person now. Jane is now his equal, not a woman of weaker gender. Similarly, in *Aurora Leigh*, Romney becomes blind after a fire started by peasants and visits Aurora, who declares that she loves him. They decide to marry each other with the hope of creating a better world combined with love and work. The poem ends with Aurora’s meditations about love and art, including material remedies for the social evils.

## CONCLUSION

Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* can be regarded as a masterpiece for providing an insight into the aspirations of women and encouraging women to take their place in the outside world by participating in professions usually regarded as masculine. *Aurora Leigh* reflects the contemporary conditions of its time. It deals with love, art, politics, philosophy, and religion. In a time when women were constrained by social life, laws, and religion, Aurora becomes the voice of the marginalized women whose identities were already formed. Hers is an outcry against the inferiority of women and for gaining her economic freedom and self-will in the name of all women who were trapped in their conventional role. Her determination in moving

from the domestic sphere to the public sphere is significant as a poet for the emancipation of women from the patriarchal order.

Cultural materialism, as a theory in literary criticism, has been sensitive to the issues related with marginalized groups and influential in their representation. Cultural materialism “registers its commitment to the transformation of a social order which exploits people on grounds of race, gender and class” (Dollimore & Sinfield, 1994, p. viii). In this regard, Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* articulates dissident and subversive features. Her challenge against the patriarchal ideology is a precursor of the transformation of gender hierarchy and dominant capitalism.

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