

SUPPRESSED VOICES OF VICTORIAN POETRY: REPRESENTATION OF THE WORKING CLASS IN JANET HAMILTON'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

In contrast to the popularity of working-class issues among mainstream Victorian writers, the voices of working-class writers who deal with the problems of their own social groups are not sufficiently heard and noticed in the 19th century Victorian literature. Remarkably, Janet Hamilton (1795-1873) is one of these un-canonized working-class writers who tackle the problems of factory workers and use writing as a political instrument of creating solidarity among the workers by provoking them to resist oppression and exploitation. This study takes Janet Hamilton's "Poems, Essays, and Sketches" (1870) as its object of scrutiny to unravel her unwavering commitment to improving social and economic conditions of the working classes. The study will throw an additional light on Hamilton's worthwhile struggle to become the spokesperson for the suppressed and silenced voices of working classes who were marginalized and alienated.

Key Words: working class poetry, Victorian Period, Janet Hamilton, Chartism

Viktorya Dönemi Şiirinin Bastırılmış Sesleri: Janet Hamilton'ın Şiirlerinde İşçi Sınıfı Temsili

ÖZET

Ana akım Viktorya Dönemi yazarları arasında alt sınıf problemlerinin popüleritesine rağmen, kendi sosyal sınıfının problemlerine daha gerçekçi şekilde yer veren 19. yüzyıl Viktorya Dönemi işçi sınıfı yazarlarının sesleri yeterince duyulmamış ve dikkat çekmemiştir. Janet Hamilton (1795-1873), işçi sınıfı sorunlarına yönelen, yazarlarını işçiler arasında örgütlenmeyi sağlamak için politik bir araç olarak kullanan ve sömürüye ve baskıya karşı direnişi savunan, kanonlaşmamış işçi sınıfı yazarlarından sadece birisidir. Bu nedenle, bu çalışma, Janet Hamilton'ın "Poems, Essays, and Sketches" (1870) başlıklı eserini inceleyerek, işçi sınıfının sosyal ve ekonomik koşullarının iyileştirilmesi konusuna şairin sarsılmaz bağlılığını ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma ayrıca, Hamilton'ın bir kenara itilerek yalnızlaştırılmış, bastırılmış ve sessizleştirilmiş işçi sınıfının sözcüsü olma yönünde vermiş olduğu son derece önemli çabasına da ışık tutacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: işçi sınıfı şiiri, Viktorya Dönemi, Janet Hamilton, Çartizm

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Introduction

Notwithstanding the abundance of writing that expounds on the social, economic, and cultural repercussions of aggressive industrial development, poor living conditions, and the exploitation of working classes in Victorian Britain, little or no attention is paid to the working-class writers who provide an experiential insight into the problems of working classes. In debunk of the constraining canonical representation, wide-ragingly dominated by well-established figures of high and middle-class writers like Alfred Lord Tennyson, Charles Dickens, Browning, and Matthew Arnold, the 19th century, in fact, “exhibits the burgeoning diversity of voice and subject that accompanies the development of laboring-class verse” (McEathron, 2005: xviii). This diversity, to a great extent, is ascribable to the unprecedented rise of literacy not only among the middle-classes but also among the working classes. The outcome, as can easily be estimated, is a stupendous penchant of the reading public that consists not necessarily of intellectuals but ordinary people for the printed materials, including political pamphlets, newspapers, and periodicals apart from fiction of prose and poetry. In his examination of working-class literacy in 19th-century Victorian Britain, David F. Mitch puts a strong emphasis on the value of education not only in terms of its “direct advantages in dealing with recorded statements but also because of a perception that it confers broader attitudinal and cognitive characteristics” (1992: 7). To put it more plainly, education fosters the emergence of a more inquisitive, disruptive, and self-conscious working-class which cannot be easily defeated, dominated, and subordinated. In addition to being avid consumers of literature produced by the mainstream writers, these working-class writers make use of their literacy efficiently to convey their politically-engrained social messages for the improvement of the working-class people's low standards of life and work, and thus, aim to create consciousness among the socially, culturally, and politically neglected or overlooked working classes. In that respect, Janet Hamilton (1795-1873) is marked as a resilient, self-educated, Scottish woman writer and poet who achieves to circumvent her socially disadvantaged position through radical political writing. Born as the daughter of a shoemaker, Hamilton becomes a “tambourer”, a housewife and a mother of ten children while publishing “many periodical articles and four volumes of essays and verse during her lifetime” (Boos, 2008: 35). So, the aim of this study is particularly to focus on Janet Hamilton's *Poems, Essays, and Sketches* (1870) which addresses the major issues of working-classes and their struggle for social justice and equality. A critical survey of Hamilton's poetry will lay bare how the rigid social stratification in Victorian Britain legitimizes the exploitation of the labour force provided by working classes and further relegates them to the marginalized position of being socially and politically deprived individuals.

Intellectual Evolution of the Working Class in Victorian Britain

By virtue of the refinement of the publication industry and the printing facilities along with the increase of the reading public in the 19th century, working classes could obtain greater opportunities to read and be informed about the ongoing political and intellectual debates outside of their own social milieu. In referring to the first quarter of the 19th century, Paul Thomas Murphy comments on the doubling of the literacy among working classes and argues that “[w]hile education was not yet systematized or universally available in England and Wales, most of the working class had the opportunity to attend dame and other day schools, Sunday schools, mechanics' institutes, and other adult schools” (1994: 8). Despite the notably unsystematic methodology pursued in the education system, the common spirit of the age is, beyond doubt, to instill the minds of Victorians with ultimate faith in the possibility of constructing more civilized, prosperous and progressive society by means of educating the masses of people and enlightening their minds about the current social and political problems.

Similarly, John Goodridge characterizes the 19th century as “a period of intense worldwide radicalisation and political awakening” which culminated in “the emergence of a distinctive proletarian literary culture” (2006: xv). The social agency and activism of working classes show a steadfast escalation in parallel to workers’ growing political consciousness about the sweeping role played by the labour force in the economic and political welfare of the country, underpinning Great Britain as the world’s greatest industrial and colonial power in 19th century. The awakening of class-consciousness among the working-class ensures, what Savage and Miles suggest as, the politicization of the working class, “paving the way for a more militant and combative trade union movement” (1994: 41). The shared vulnerabilities of workers have a powerful influence in leading the way for thriving of a more professionally organized and politically-oriented working class, spearheaded by the Chartist movement which is unswervingly dedicated to terminate the ancient upper class tradition of abusing workers and condemning them into a lifelong poverty. Biagini and Reid bring forth the exigency of founding a systematic coordination between working-classes and developing a revolutionary activist discourse, ushering the amelioration of working conditions:

Indeed, the labour movement activists of the second half of the nineteenth century were remarkably successful in achieving most of the political reforms which had been pursued in vain by previous generations of plebeian radicals, and eventually also in obtaining a number of social and economic reforms which were of greater practical significance to the industrial working classes than anything asked for by the Chartists (1991: 5).

Working classes in Victorian Britain are inextricably aligned with the Chartist movement which appears as the first large-scale political organization since Magna Carta of 1215, responsible for uniting workers around common political ideals and the formation of “self-conscious working-class institutions-trade unions, friendly societies, educational and religious movements, political organisations, periodicals-working-class intellectual traditions” (Thompson, 1966: 194). The People’s Charter becomes extremely successful in fuelling the spirit of protest and radicalism through a rupture of published materials; pamphlets, tracts, and newspapers. In his direct allusion to Magna Carta, Malcolm Chase writes that “Magna Charta constituted the foundation stone of English liberties and the People’s Charter would complete the edifice” (2007: 8). Triggering an immense catalytic upheaval in the society, the chartists, regardless of their unsuccessful attempt in convincing the first Reform Parliament to grant working classes the right to vote, succeeded in changing the “public discourse about the right of political representation” and had a great political influence in “the passage of the Reform Act of 1867, which was widely regarded as the first step toward enacting universal male suffrage and fulfilling the aims of Chartism” (Bossche, 2014: 2). Shifting the power from aristocracy to middle classes through a series of Reform Bills, the chartist movement not only contributed to the expansion of voting rights and parliamentary representation into wider social classes but also demanded “greater equality in the distribution of wealth” by drawing attention to the ongoing injustices that create a great fracture in the society by dividing it into the “producers and consumers” who belong to totally different social classes (Pickering, 1995:164). Workers as the producers of wealth are stripped off wealth and sentenced into suffering from hunger while un-labouring aristocracy and upper middle classes enjoy the economic privilege of wealth and prosperity. Hence, instead of dilating already deepened gap between the classes, Chartism and the working classes enkindle a new vision of a society where the divisions between classes are, at least, decreased if not totally eliminated. The conspicuous rise of the self-made middle classes, and their economic and political empowerment which threatens aristocracy, in that respect, becomes substantial evidence showing the possibility of constructing more permeable boundaries between classes.

Significantly enough, the key factor of the Chartist achievement in transforming the 19th century working class movement into a nation-wide political struggle by getting the full the support of the large masses of people can also be attributed to the amplification of popular presses which give powerful expression to the unresolved problems of working classes and, advantageously, are really cheap enough even for workers to buy. These presses like *Clarion*, *New Age*, and *North Star*, are characterized by their “independent infrastructures” and became enormously popular “as an alternative means of periodical production apart from commercial, profit-oriented print” (Miller, 2010: 702). It should be noted that the rapidity of working-class organization maintained by these periodicals in forging an ideological consolidation to bring together workers who are unaware of each other under a colossal of shared socialist ideals is an unrivalled accomplishment that has not been witnessed in the previous centuries. In that sense, these radical presses play a central role in attaining coordination among disparate groups of working classes and taking the lead in reaching into the most isolated and neglected segments of the society. E. P. Thompson explicates the pivotal role of the radical presses in expanding the propaganda and arranging the communication between workers,

1816-20 were, above all, years in which popular Radicalism took its style from the hand-press and the weekly periodical. This means of propaganda was in its fullest egalitarian phase. Steam-printing had scarcely made headway (commencing with *The Times* in 1814), and the plebeian Radical group had as easy access to the hand-press as Church or King. Transport was too slow for the national (or London) newspaper to weaken the position of the provincial press; but rapid enough to enable the weekly *Political Register* or *Black Dwarf* to maintain a running commentary on the news. The means of production of the printed page were sufficiently cheap to mean that neither capital nor advertising revenue gave much advantage; while the successful Radical periodical provided a living not only for the editor, but also for regional agents, booksellers, and itinerant hawkers, thereby making of Radicalism, for the first time a profession which could maintain its own full-time agitators (1966: 674).

The proliferation of the working-class publishers concomitantly with the self-educated and intellectually burnished readers has culminated in the upsurge of an alternative working-class culture and literature which are subversive, defiant, and class-conscious, oriented towards forming solidarity between workers besides generating a distinctive working-class communal values, creating a backlash against the elitist set of values of the higher class. Correspondingly, shared political ideals and quotidian communal experiences of working classes find a material expression in the writings of working-class writers like James Hogg, Robert Bloomfield, John Clare, Janet Hamilton, Eliza Cook, Elizabeth Duncan, and many others who were, though being popular during their own times, had been long forsaken and left outside the mainstream canonical representation. Thus, Scott McEathron's edited volume of *Nineteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets* in 2006 and Florence S. Boos' anthology of *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain* in 2008 are important contributions that fill a huge gap in the Victorian scholarship by diving into the writings of working-class writers. Being one of the most emblematic and prolific writers among the 19th century working class women, underscoring the significant political and social issues of Victorian Britain, Janet Hamilton is allocated a whole section in Boos' anthology.

Working Class Poetry of Janet Hamilton

A remarkable observation is made by Valentina Bold who puts forward that the most riveting poetry in the 19th century is produced alternatively by “women dismissed, because they lacked formal education, as ‘self-taught’ and thus, overlooked by their contemporaries” (1997: 246). Janet Hamilton is one of these neglected but amazing women of the Victorian age who are courageous enough to overcome the social, political, and cultural boundaries of their age. Having been forced to work since the very early years of her life “from the age seven” (Bold, 1997: 255), Hamilton was born and raised in a Scottish working class family, and “never had

the advantage of an attendance at the village school; but her mother taught her to read; and she invented a kind of rude writing for her own use, when over fifty years of age" (Murdock, 1883: 334). Considering the limited social and cultural circumstances of her epoch, Hamilton's astonishing skill in producing and publishing four volumes of poetry during her lifetime is quite noteworthy deserving genuine appraisal. She managed to publish her first book of poetry after her sixties. Among her published books are *Poems and Essays of a Miscellaneous Character* in 1863, *Poems of Purpose and Sketches in Prose of Scottish Peasant Life and Character in Auld Langsyne* in 1865, *Poems and Ballads* in 1868 and *Poems, Essays and Sketches* in 1870. With her exceedingly limited financial resources, Hamilton "also started a small circulating library for the benefit of her neighbours, and she turned her attention to her children's education with zeal" (Boos, 2008: 50). Hamilton's exceptionality as a working-class woman who achieves to be a published writer can be understood better when the patriarchal mindset of the conservative Victorian society is taken into account, which does not offer women sufficiently free space to write and publish their works even for middle-class women writers like Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Bronte Sisters, George Eliot, Augusta Webster. Working as a "tambourer" and educating her children at home, Hamilton "remained an avid reader, staying awake after her family went to sleep, often until two in the morning, in order to read" (Meehan, 2008: 87). The ramification of her social deficiency as a member of working-class is reflected on her decay of eyesight after her sixties, resulting in blindness similar to other working-class women poets who are physically disabled and often crippled by untreated diseases, work-place accidents, unsanitary and poor living conditions or other causes. In the preface of her book, *Poems, Essays, and Sketches* (1870) which is dedicated to her brothers and sisters of the working classes, Hamilton depicts the intricacy of being a mother of ten children while, at the same time, trying to read and write as follows:

After I had entered the married state, and was engaged in rearing a young family on small means, I was busy enough, and my reading hours were taken from my sleep; and many an hour have I spent in reading, holding the book in one hand, and nursing an infant on my lap with the other (Hamilton, 1870: x).

Hamilton was dedicated to the cause of the working class and dealt with the overwhelming predicaments that working class women went through because of pervading problems of alcoholism and unrecovered poverty in their married life. She carried on writing unwaveringly till the end of her life without feeling deterred by any physical or social impediments in her life. As Dorothy McMillan states, Hamilton "continued to compose even during the last eighteen years of her life when she was blind and her son James acted amanuensis" (1997: 84). Not only her son but also her husband was the strong supporter of her insatiable passion for reading books and writing. Since she did not learn to write till the age of fifty, she composed her poems in her head and her husband "transcribed for her" (Boos, 2008: 50). Although she never had the opportunity to have a school education, as Boos underlines, Janet Hamilton "have become for a time Victorian Scotland's most widely read working-class poet" (2001: 262).

There is a diligent concern evidently observed in the poetry of Janet Hamilton for the workers who struggle for the improvement of their living standards and working conditions. Hamilton "has developed a keen awareness of the ongoing social, political, and economic affairs of her country and uses her writing as an effective medium of conveying her radical socialist ideas" (Bulut Sarıkaya, 2024: 119). She unleashes a sturdy war against the exploitation of workers and the asymmetrical power relationship that is imposed from above by the aggressive boost of heavy industrialization affiliated with the capitalist economic expansion of the world countries pioneered by Great Britain. A great attentiveness is paid to the hard working

conditions of workers in Hamilton's poems. "A Lay of the Tambour Frame" is one of these poems focusing specifically on women's occupation as tambourers who have to work in more terrible conditions than their male counterparts.

*Bending with straining eyes
Over the tambour frame,
Never a change in her weary routine-
Slave in all but the name.
Tambour, ever tambour,
Tambour the wreathing lines
Of ' broidered silk, till beauty's robe
In rainbow lustre shines. (Hamilton, 1880: 249)*

In this poem, Hamilton complains about the time-consuming and physically exhausting work of tambour embroidery, an extremely popular job of women which is transported from the eastern countries through Britain's colonial trade. The poem touches upon a significant social problem of Victorian society in which women are not given any chance to work in better working conditions and so many women's lives are wasted by working as a tambourer which needs women to sit still in the same physical posture and do the same "weary routine" everyday in order to meet the aesthetic demands of the Victorian fashion industry while preparing the robes of upper-middle and high-class ladies (Hamilton, 1880: 249). During Britain's industrial development, women are seen to be greatly employed in textile factories. As Sharpe and Chapman argue, although the lace was manufactured in factories between the years 1815-41, "the patterning was done by manual labour by tambouring or running" (1996: 326). Unparalleled to the hard work that it demanded, the tambour work was hardly enough paid off. "In the 1820s such was the demand for cheap labour as tambourers that women workers were drawn from" all over the country (Sharpe and Chapman, 1996: 331). The poem draws attention to an evaded fact that the silk embroidery, which is a symbol of higher social status is actually produced in gruesome conditions by the working class women whose workforce is violated severely by the system. In this regard, Hamilton compares tambouring to a modern form of slavery that depends on the oppression of workers for the welfare of higher classes. "Slave in all but the name" (Hamilton, 1880: 249) entails a crucial disparagement of Britain's brutal economic system, which tyrannizes the working class with heavy working hours and low wages while rewarding the higher class with the comfort of luxurious lifestyle. The "colourless cheek", "tangling hair", and "fingers cramped and chilled" are the substantial proofs mirroring women workers' exploitation by the material capitalist values of the Victorian Britain (Hamilton, 1880: 249). What is more excruciating for women is to be invariably conceived as "abjects vile" by their male employers when women knock at their doors to ask for a job (Hamilton, 1880: 249). The limited availability and the scarcity of jobs for women are specifically underlined in the poem with these words: "It is tambour you must, / Naught else you have to do" (Hamilton, 1880: 249). Moreover, a salient allusion is made to the unprotected social rights of women workers who are left "[u]nshielded and alone" having no "union strikes" for women's cause (Hamilton, 1880: 249). With the bereavement of their rights for equal payment, equal job opportunities, and the legal protection of trade unions, women are inevitably rendered susceptible to the work place oppression and exploitation. Rosemary Auchmuty confirms that although women participated in the Chartist demonstrations, they were unjustly isolated by labour organizations and "opposition to women in public life removed them from scene of organized labour" (1975: 114). The majority of the workers' unions considered women workers as their rivals and adopted a misogynist thought that women should not work but stay at their homes. In defiance of the increasing number of women in a wide variety of jobs, trade unions "discouraged women from joining their ranks, and many strikes were conducted against women

workers, particularly by skilled bookbinders and printers” (Stearns, 2013: 115). Through her acutely developed political consciousness, Hamilton, far from being an illiterate and ignorant worker, proves herself to be a legally and politically informed social activist and a fervent supporter of female workers' social rights. Her valiant social activism and discourse of propaganda are more manifestly observed in the following lines:

*Selfish, unfeeling men!
Have ye not had your will?
High pay, short hours; yet your cry, like the leech,
Is, Give us, give us still.
She who tambours—tambours
For fifteen hours a day—
Would have shoes on her feet, and dress for church,
Had she a third of your pay. (Hamilton, 1880: 250)*

The main target of Hamilton's criticism, in the lines above, is, most obviously, men who withhold their support from women's cause. Although women appear as ardent upholders of the Chartist organization, taking a position near men, not against them, as Hamilton underpins in her poem, women workers are left alone by male co-workers. Accusing male workers of being narrowly self-concerned, Hamilton foregrounds a much more denigrated social position of female workers who are forced to work harder than men but are paid less. As a tambourer, a woman worker has to work fifteen hours a day while male workers had, long before, won their rights for “the legal eight-hour day” (Lawrence, 1991: 79). In a similar fashion, Savage and Miles also state that “most men have values higher than 100 and most women lower than 100, testifying to the importance of gender inequality in the labour market” (1994: 25). Hamilton's poem, quite remarkably, opens a wide portal to the abuse of women workers who are compelled to work longer hours than men with minimum wages. This gender-based discrimination against women workers elicits hostile confutation of the poet who discloses patriarchal preconceptions subsisting in every segment of the Victorian society. Hamilton is disgusted with the male workers of her own class insofar as she describes them as “the leech” trying to get more payment while women workers are isolated to suffer alone helplessly in harsh working conditions (Hamilton, 1880: 250).

In addition to “A Lay of the Tambour Frame” which explores the problems of tambour workers, “Oor Location” is another poem by Hamilton which forces its readers to look at the ghetto areas occupied by the working classes. Adopting a working class Scottish accent, Hamilton envisages a vivid picture of actual social milieu where working class families live and spend their leisure time.

*A hunner funnels bleezin', reekin',
Coal an' ironstane, charrin', smeekin';
Navvies, miners, keepers, fillers,
Puddlers, rollers, iron millers;
Reestit, reekit, raggit laddies,
Firemen, enginemen, an' Paddies;
Boatmen, banksmen, rough and rattlin',
'Bout the wecht wi' colliers battlin',
Sweatin', swearin', fechtin', drinkin',
Change-house bells an' gill- stoups clinkin',
Police-ready men and willin'-
Aye at han' when stoups are fillin',*

*Clerks, an' counter-loupers plenty,
Wi' trim moustache and whiskers dainty.* (Hamilton, 1880: 75)

Hamilton's choice of Scottish working class accent like "bleezin', reekin', charrin', and smeeikin'" quite efficiently shows the essential reality of working class settlements where the weather is blazing accompanied by a heavy stink stemming from factories' waste disposals and dirty streets. The mention of working class occupations like navvies (road constructors), miners, keepers, fillers (textile workers), puddlers (iron workers), rollers ("one that rolls or performs a rolling operation"), and banksmen ("an overseer at the bank of a mine drift") (def. 2024, Merriam-Webster Dictionary) are insinuations of the fact that all these heavy works that require great physical strength are done by the working classes who are propelled to carry the burden of Britain's industrial development. The miners, road constructors, canal opening workers live together in slum areas with stinks of filth, smoke and spitefulness. The disastrous impact of the accelerated industrialization in the 19th century reverberates in every layer of the society, and yet, as Hamilton's poem displays blatantly, it is most catastrophically reflected in the urbanized regions nearby factory buildings, largely populated by the working classes. These slum areas are spatially notorious for their squalid conditions with extremely unclean streets, broken or poor infrastructures and polluted air as residences of poor people with extensive deficiencies of social facilities. The ecological effects of heavy industrialization in Victorian Britain were extensively great and inescapably intimidating for the health of people. As Simmons writes, "[t]he city had for some time been the object of censure, especially in the 1830s and 1840s, when the health of the working population was affected by poor conditions, which led among other illnesses to outbreaks of Asiatic cholera and typhoid" (2001: 174).

More strikingly, it is not only the unimproved poverty and deteriorated sanitation that working classes are inflicted with, but also, they suffer from the alcohol abuse, precipitating the destruction of families and neglect of their children. Hamilton's indignation is also stirred by the "dirty, drucken wives" whose overconsumption of alcohol brings about dreadful consequences like the death of their babies: "hoo many bairnies' lives / Lost ilk year through their neglect" (Hamilton, 1880: 76). Alarming high degree of alcohol consumption is presented to be an extremely important problem of the working class people that is held accountable for the shattering of families and the death of small children due to the malnutrition and parental neglect. Drinking among men and women of the working class seems to be chosen as an alternative path to evade and forget about the prevailing problems which appear as unbearably harsh, overwhelming, and torturing. So, alcohol offers these people a provisional escape from their present miseries caused by the expeditious growth of industrialization. The poem, in that sense, provides a bright insight into the concealed and neglected peripheries of the Victorian society, imbued with "ruin, crime, disgrace, an' shame" and consisting of "the strugglin', toilin' masses" who have lost their confidence in the possibility of amelioration in their ongoing status of lowliness and subservience (Hamilton, 1880: 76). The poem ends with Hamilton's grieving over her "kin's o' ruination" in dilapidated districts of working classes whose lives are destroyed because of their drinking problem along with their despotic employers and un-granted political rights (1880: 76).

Hamilton's utter sense of hopelessness at the sheer agony of working classes is more vigorously unearthed in "The Lowly Song of a Lowly Bard" in which the poet endeavours to compensate her activist despondency with her religious stoicism that helps her endure political injustices and social deprivation. The poem begins with Hamilton's assertion of her lower social standing by saying that "[w]e are lowly" and "[l]owly those I dwell among" (Hamilton 1880: 129). Hamilton's class-consciousness and emotional identification with the disadvantaged

groups of working classes are orchestrated by her personal experiences of being subordinated to the upper classes.

*Low in station, low in labour,
Low in all that wordlings prize,
Till the voice say, "Come up hither,"
To a mansion in the skies.*

*From that lowly cot the sainted
Rose from earth's low cares and woes;
From that lowly couch, my mother
To her home in heaven arose. (Hamilton, 1880: 129)*

Hamilton, in this quotation, highlights the restlessly unending repression of working classes that passes from generation to generation as a vicious circle. Hamilton remembers that her mother, all throughout her life, remained a working class member at the bottom of society till her death which spiritually enabled her to change her social position from bottom to heaven. Accordingly, Hamilton's criticism is not merely directed at the upper classes who position themselves as superior to working classes but probes deeper into the ideological undercurrents of the political and economic system of oppression which is liable for the construction of strict hierarchical structures and impermeable borders between social classes. The poem sheds a bright light on industrialization, sustained by the capitalist economic system which needs working classes for the maintenance of a consistent economic development; however, it never really has a genuine intention of allowing upward mobility in the social status of working classes since this can jeopardize the subsistence of the whole economic system. Hamilton is deeply acquainted with this surreptitious project of the capital industry and underlines her lowly status and affirms that she was born into a working class family and will be "low in labour" and live a lowly life (1880: 129). At some point, the despairing nature of the poem shifts into an inspirited call for resistance and struggle to break the chain of the working class slavery and put a final end to their generational cycle of oppression.

*Yet, not low my aspirations
High and strong my soul's desire
To assist my toiling brothers
Upward, onward to aspire.*

*Upward to the heaven above us,
Onward in the march of mind,
Upward to the shrine of freedom,
Onward, working for our kind. (Hamilton, 1880: 130)*

Contrary to her politically imposed social inferiority, Hamilton accentuates her spiritual superiority and her elevated standing of aspiration to work for and assist in the cause of working classes to create a meaningful change in the life of her "toiling brothers" by alleviating their social conditions (1880: 130). The elegiac tone of the poem, at the beginning, gradually undertakes the flavour of a slogan, turning the poem into a propaganda tool igniting the masses to take action against the oppression of working classes. Strikingly, the poem, which begins as mourning for the working classes, eventually evolves to an activist poem transmitting the spirit of revolution into the masses of working classes. Hamilton, as the poem demonstrates, is concerned with the "march of mind" and dedicated to opening the minds of working classes to fight for their social and political rights and help them reach "the shrine of freedom" (Hamilton, 1880: 130). Accordingly, Hamilton concludes her poem with a crucial message disseminated

to the working classes that regardless of their low social status, “nothing low” resides in their “mind, in heart, or habit” and therefore, what they need to do is “[u]pward look and onward go” (Hamilton, 1880: 130). Hamilton’s encouragement of working classes is astoundingly motivating, ushering them to take more active and decisive steps in the way to the working class liberty and termination of oppression.

In tune with literature’s undeniably constitutive role in organizing working classes to form unions and solidarity among themselves, Hamilton’s poems can be considered a highly influential driving force for the promotion of unionism as a means of creating collective working class consciousness that would combine working classes as more organized and more powerfully outspoken social groups. To this end, Hamilton, on the one hand, works for gathering working classes under shared concerns, while on the other hand, unhesitatingly criticizes governmental policies. “Rhymes For the Times” is one of these poems which adduce Hamilton not as a simple housewife and the mother of ten children, but as an intellectually incisive poet with an awareness of social and political debates going on in her country. In the first lines of the poem, Hamilton expresses her desire to talk about “the deeds o’ the times” and about what is going on “[a]roun’ us, amang us, an’ farther beyon’” (Hamilton, 1880: 258). Hamilton’s annotations on the current political issues of her country commences with the proclamation of her admiration for Queen Victoria: “O Sovereign Victoria! bless’d and belov’d” (1880: 258). Interestingly enough, immediately after paying her tribute to the queen, Hamilton begins to rebuke political decisions, Reform Bills and the Poor Law with her condemnation of “famishin’ Tories” who are “loupin’ and yellin’” at the parliament (1880: 259).

*We’re at peace wi’ the warl’ , an’ lang may it be,
In tradin’ and fechtin’ we’re lords o’ the sea ;
But herry’t wi’ taxes, and rackit wi’ toil,
By the lords o’ the State, the mine, an’ the soil.*

*Oh, heavy the bluid o’ the innocent hings
On the skirts o’ vile hizzies : my auld heart it wrings
To hear that sae mony puir babies fin’ death
At the mither’s ain han’ , as sune’s they draw breath.* (Hamilton, 1880: 259)

At first, Hamilton acclaims her country’s exceptional skill in expanding its trade, improving its relationship with foreign countries and becoming the foremost colonial power in the world. Once articulating her national pride of the greatness of the British Empire, Hamilton draws a critical attention to the dejected situation of working classes who are robbed by their own governments with heavy taxes and tortured by hard work; “herry’t wi’ taxes and rackit wi’ toil” (1880: 259). Intersecting the political power of Great Britain with the miserable social status of working classes, Hamilton conveys an important political message about the insignificance of Britain’s economic prosperity and profoundness as long as it keeps its working class in a desperate state of poverty. Hamilton adds an ethical judgment into her socialist account by expounding how her heart is crushed when she hears about so many poor babies find death at their mothers’ lap as soon as they take their first breath; “sae mony puir babies fin’ death / At the mither’s ain han’ , as sune’s they draw breath” (Hamilton, 1880: 259). What is implied in the poem is the culpability of politicians and rulers who are complicit in such a perilous escalation of infant mortality. Hamilton highlights infant deaths as one of the most important prevailing social problems of Victorian Britain. Indeed, the political disputes in the 19th century, as Pat Thane argues, are largely focused on “the issues of housing, sanitation, unemployment, sweated labour and the length of the working day” (1991: 246). In adherence to these issues, “human survival - death and sickness rates, levels of income, the quality of

living space - became politicised as never before” (Thane, 1991: 246). Poor sanitary conditions and lack of nourishment are closely interrelated problems with the death of newborn babies who could not receive adequate care and nourishment. Additionally, after asserting the pervasively high infant deaths in the 19th century, Dyhouse pays attention to the geographical variations of these rates and writes that “a much higher proportion of babies perished in the towns than in the countryside, and rates were particularly high in the overcrowded urban-industrial and mining districts of the Midlands and North” (1978: 248). Dyhouse’s observation invokes the intersectionality of the working class poverty and the increased rates of child deaths. Hamilton’s poem, likewise, deals with infant mortality as a major social and political problem of the working class people awaiting urgent solutions. What is more noteworthy is Hamilton’s unique way of presenting working class issues in connection to Britain’s expansionist foreign policy and its colonial and industrial power, suggesting that before venturing to prove its economic and political power to the world, Britain should spare a sincere effort to solve its internal problems like the socially, economically, culturally, and politically ignored groups of working classes who are exploited, oppressed, and marginalized from the mainstream society.

Conclusion

Literature in the 19th century was used as a pretty effective platform of negotiating the social and political problems of the Victorian age, shaping the minds of the reading public with democratic and liberal ideas. Hence, a great number of middle-class writers concentrate predominantly on the struggles of lower classes with the intension of bringing literature into a closer contact with the real life experiences of working-classes who are the most suppressed and underprivileged groups of the society. Conversely, not enough opportunity in the literary sphere is given to the working-class writers and poets to express their own class struggles and problems. Arising out of an underprivileged working class family, Janet Hamilton reflects her first-hand experiences of being a working-class woman in an exceedingly and innately class-conscious society, structured upon the oppression and exploitation of working classes that are captured vibrantly in her poetry. Reading Janet Hamilton’s poetry, which is saturated with social and economic problems of working classes, provides an illuminating insight into the unexplored field of working-class Victorian poetry, written by the poets of working classes. It is evidently observed that diverse from the moderate socialism of the fully-established and greatly recognized middle class writers who zoom in relatively similar social issues, Hamilton’s poetry demonstrates more emotionally internalized, radical socialist ideas, articulated in a subversive political discourse eliciting more active resistance from its working class readers. The main concern of Hamilton’s poetry is revealed to be redirecting public attention into the problems of decentralized groups of working classes who are culturally marginalized and politically isolated. To this end, discrimination against workers, inhumane working conditions, unimproved life standards of working classes in combination with the growing political neglect of these problems are discerned to be central issues that are elucidated painstakingly in the poetry of Hamilton. The study also demonstrated Hamilton’s immensely developed political views in spite of the extremely limited educational facilities that were allowed for the people of her own social class. In provoking working classes to fight for their political and social rights that are denied to be granted by the British government, Hamilton’s poems are exposed to be implanted with reformative political spirit, targeted to improve working-class life standards, and in this manner, posit a crucial challenge to the strictly established and widely acknowledged hierarchal class formation of Victorian Britain.

Information Note

The article has been prepared in accordance with research and publication ethics. This study does not require ethics committee approval.

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