

Communicating the bond between Law and Literature: Human Rights Issues in Select English Poems

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper aims to examine and explore human rights issues in Sarojini Naidu's 'The Broken Wing', Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'The Cry of the Children' and Langston Hughes' 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers'. These verses span diverse historical, cultural, and political landscapes. Poetry has long served as a powerful medium for articulating the human condition, voicing dissent, and advocating for justice. Each poem is highly evocative and deeply rooted in its socio-political context, revealing the poet's deep engagement with themes such as freedom, oppression, and the resilience of human spirit. Naidu's 'The Broken Wing' reflects the colonial and nationalistic struggles of early 20th-century India, portraying the yearning for liberation and spiritual dignity, and reflects India's spiritual resilience of a colonized people. Browning's 'The Cry of the Children' is a searing indictment of child labour in Victorian England, highlighting the moral failure of industrial society. Hughes' 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' delves into African American identity and historical memory, emphasizing continuity, heritage, and endurance in the face of racial injustice. Through these texts, the poets not only document suffering but also inspire resistance and hope, making poetry a vital space for human rights discourse.

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Introduction

Human rights, enshrined in constitutions, international laws, and declarations (United Nations, 1948), are fundamental to the dignity, freedom, and equality of all individuals. While legal frameworks aim to protect these rights through enforceable policies and institutions, the pursuit of justice and human dignity often begins in the realm of human consciousness and social imagination. It is here, before laws are written or courts convened, that the values underpinning human rights are nurtured and contested.

Literature, especially poetry, has long played a vital role in cultivating this awareness by providing a space where the voices of the oppressed, marginalized, and silenced can be heard. In her poem 'Still I Rise', Maya Angelou (1978) writes, "you may trod me in the very dirt / But still, like dust, I'll rise." This highly evocative line reflects the poet's resistance to racism and powerfully asserts the right to dignity,

identity, and self-worth. Where legal discourse outlines the structure of human rights, poetry infuses it with emotion, empathy, and urgency.

Through its use of rhythm, imagery, and symbolism, poetry possesses a unique power to transcend barriers of time, place, and language. It can distill complex experiences of suffering and resilience into a form that resonates universally, fostering a sense of shared humanity. In doing so, poetry has historically inspired and sustained movements for justice, equality, fraternity, and the assertion of human dignity, turning personal pain into a collective call for action.

The present research paper explores this intersection of human rights and literature by analyzing three select poems: Sarojini Naidu's 'The Broken Wing' (1917), Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'The Cry of the Children' (1843), and Langston Hughes' 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' (1921). Each of these works, emerging from different historical and cultural contexts, addresses critical issues of social injustice, suffering, and the universal yearning for freedom and recognition.

Method

This research paper employs a qualitative methodology, conducting a detailed analytical study of the selected poems. This approach prioritizes an in-depth, interpretive reading over quantitative metrics to understand the nuances of the literary texts. The analysis delves deeply into textual evidence, specifically examining elements such as imagery, symbolism, metaphor, and tone within each work. The primary goal is to uncover the deeper meanings and thematic concerns related to human rights that are embedded within the poetry.

To develop its central arguments, the research utilizes a framework of associations and correlations to build its interpretive claims. This involves drawing explicit associations between specific literary devices and the broader social injustices they represent. Furthermore, the study establishes correlations between the poets' unique socio-historical contexts and the powerful perspectives articulated in their writing. By identifying these recurring patterns and connections, the analysis constructs a cohesive interpretation of how each poem functions as social commentary. This method allows for a nuanced exploration of how poetic language shapes our understanding of justice, suffering, and resilience. Ultimately, the research synthesizes these textual connections to demonstrate the profound role of poetry in the human rights discourse.

Results and Discussion

Sarojini Naidu's 'The Broken Wing' (1917) engages with colonial India's struggle for spiritual and political freedom, offering a poetic plea for national awakening and the dignity of the human soul. The poem reflects the pain of oppression while evoking the hope of renewal, making it a profound commentary on the right to self-determination. In contrast, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'The Cry of the Children' (1843) is a powerful denunciation of child labour in 19th-century England. By invoking the emotional and physical toll of industrial exploitation, Browning foregrounds the right to childhood, protection, and humane treatment. Finally, Langston Hughes's 'The

Negro Speaks of Rivers' (1921) draws on African and African American history to celebrate resilience in the face of systemic racial injustice. Through the metaphor of rivers, Hughes asserts the right to cultural identity, memory, and historical recognition.

These poems illustrate how poetry not only critiques injustice but also reaffirms human dignity, solidarity, and hope. They demonstrate that literature, particularly poetry, serves as a timeless companion to legal activism by elevating human rights from abstract legal principles to deeply felt human experiences.

Sarojini Naidu, a renowned Indian political activist and poet, opens 'The Broken Wing' with a powerful and uplifting image of renewal that is deeply entrenched with symbolic meaning and human rights themes. In the evocative opening stanza, Naidu (1917) asks:

“Shall Spring that wakes mine ancient land again
Call to my wild and suffering heart in vain?
Or Fate's blind arrows still the pulsing note
Of my far-reaching, frail, unconquered throat?”

In these emotionally charged lines, the poet connotes the suppression of voice, identity, and cultural expression under colonial rule. The word 'Spring' symbolizes rebirth and liberation—a new dawn for the poet's 'ancient land,' India. This personification of the country reflects the right of a colonized people to reclaim their historical and cultural identity. The poet's 'wild and suffering heart' represents both individual anguish and the collective psychological trauma of the nation. The image of "Fate's blind arrows" suggests the arbitrary violence faced by the oppressed, while the 'pulsing note' from an 'unconquered throat' is a metaphor for the right to expression and the indestructible will to speak out against injustice.

This theme of liberation from colonial subjugation resonates in the work of Rabindranath Tagore. In 'Freedom', Tagore (1910) speaks of colonial exploitation and the denial of dignity, claiming freedom from fear and the burdens of the past for his motherland. Similarly, in his poem 'Where the Mind is Without Fear', Tagore (1910) envisions a world where intellectual and political freedom, equality, and dignity are fundamental rights.

The final couplet of Naidu's poem shifts the tone unexpectedly. Despite signs of renewal, the speaker asks, "Song-bird, why dost thou bear a broken wing?" (Naidu, 1917). This poignant question suggests that even with the promise of freedom, the scars of oppression and trauma remain. The broken wing serves as a metaphor for the incomplete realization of human rights, where the spirit is willing, but the nation is still wounded. This sentiment is echoed in H.V. Derozio's poem 'To India- My Native Land', where he mourns the loss of India's former glory under British rule and expresses a deep yearning for the restoration of national pride and dignity (Derozio, 1828). Ultimately, Naidu's poem concludes with a transition from darkness to light: "The great dawn breaks, the mournful night is past/ From her deep age-long sleep she wakes at last!" (Naidu, 1917). This symbolizes the end of colonial oppression and the beginning of a new era of self-determination, a theme of defiance also central to Kazi Nazrul

Islam's poem 'Bidrohi' (The Rebel), where the speaker declares himself an eternal rebel with his "head ever held high" against tyranny (Nazrul Islam, 1922).

Child labour, defined by Merriam-Webster (n.d.) as "the employment of a child in a business or industry especially in violation of state or federal statutes," has long been a widespread human rights issue. During the Industrial Revolution, children as young as five were forced to work in mines and factories under harsh, unsafe conditions, denied education, healthcare, and a safe environment. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem, 'The Cry of the Children' (1843), is a scathing protest against these brutal conditions. She opens by immediately confronting the reader with the children's suffering:

"Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,
Ere the sorrow comes with years?
They are leaning their young heads against their mothers,
And that cannot stop their tears."

The poem focuses on the premature loss of innocence and the emotional toll of exploitation, urging society to respond to their cry for justice. This sentiment was shared by her contemporary, Caroline Norton, whose poem 'A Voice from the Factories' (1836) also expressed deep sorrow over the exploitation of child labourers. Norton calls them "poor little FACTORY SLAVES" and condemns a society that profits from their suffering and stolen innocence.

Browning further illustrates the children's desperate state, portraying their grief as invisible to a society that has failed them. She writes that they "look up with their pale and sunken faces" and are "weary ere they run," having never seen the simple joys of life (Browning, 1843). Their lives are devoid of freedom or rest, with death seeming the only escape. This brutal reality is also depicted in William Blake's 'The Chimney Sweeper' (1789), where a young child, sold by his father after his mother's death, is forced into hazardous chimney work. His mispronounced cry of "'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!'" becomes a haunting symbol of lost innocence and the violation of a child's right to protection. Browning powerfully concludes by highlighting the painful irony of their situation, noting that the children are "weeping in the playtime of the others,/ In the country of the free," exposing the hypocrisy of a nation that claims liberty but denies it to its most vulnerable (Browning, 1843).

Asserting Black Identity in Langston Hughes's 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers'

For centuries, the identities of marginalized and oppressed peoples have been devalued due to systemic racism. In America, Black men and women persevered through the brutality of slavery, segregation, and systemic injustice, creating a powerful legacy of resilience and resistance. Langston Hughes, a prolific American poet and social activist, wrote 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' at the age of seventeen. The poem is a profound meditation on Black history, identity, and human rights, using the metaphor of rivers to symbolize the timeless soul and struggle of African Americans.

The poem begins by connecting Black heritage to the cradle of human civilization: "I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young" (Hughes, 1921). This line asserts

the ancient and foundational presence of Black people in world history, countering racist narratives of inferiority. Hughes continues by linking Black identity to the great achievements of ancient Egypt—"I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it"—thereby demanding recognition for Black excellence and agency. He then connects this ancient history to the American experience by invoking the Mississippi River during the era of slavery, noting he "heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans," symbolizing both the deep sorrow and the enduring resilience of the Black spirit (Hughes, 1921).

This theme of finding strength and value within the Black community, in a world that denies it, is a cornerstone of modern Black poetry. In 'Nikki-Rosa', Nikki Giovanni (1968) pushes back against narratives that focus solely on hardship, asserting that observers "never understand/ Black love is Black wealth." Similarly, Lucille Clifton's poem 'won't you celebrate with me' (1993) is a testament to self-creation in the face of adversity. Clifton, who "had no model," celebrates shaping a life despite systemic barriers, reflecting the same spirit of resilience and self-determination that flows through Hughes's rivers.

Conclusion

The finding of this study suggests that the texts of poetry can offer strong trajectories of human dignity and rights. Poetry, being 'the spontaneous overflow of emotions' of the humankind, in every sphere of life, reveals the powerful intersection of literature, that functions like a mirror of the our societies and nations across the world, and also that of law, that guards every individual from different forms of injustices and inequalities, and helps in voicing collective suffering, demanding justice, and affirming dignity. Sarojini Naidu's 'The Broken Wing' becomes a metaphorical plea for freedom, where the image of a caged bird reflects the colonial subjugation of India, vis a vis portraying the suppression of individual and national liberty. Further, it reflects on the great sacrifice of many nationalists that makes India free from British rule after a long struggle. Sarojini Naidu's poetic expression aligns with the legal right to self-determination and freedom from oppression, underscoring the importance of voice, identity, and national agency. In Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'The Cry of the Children', the legal and moral violation of child rights is laid bare. Through vivid imagery and emotional appeal, Elizabeth Barrett Browning exposes the horrors of child labour during the Industrial Revolution. The poem condemns the exploitation of children, resonating with legal principles of protection, education, and humane treatment. So, literature, here acts as an early advocate for reform, influencing public conscience and laying the groundwork for legal change. Langston Hughes' 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' serves as a poetic declaration of Black endurance, dignity, identity and historical continuity. The metaphor of rivers symbolizes the timeless soul and struggle of African Americans through slavery, discrimination, and resistance. Hughes reclaims history through poetic affirmation, linking it to the human rights of identity, equality, and historical recognition. Collectively, these poems illustrate how literature not only reflects human rights violations but also acts as a catalyst for awareness and change. When paired with law, poetry becomes a moral force, inspiring empathy and

reform.

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