

Democratic Visions in the Poetry of William Wordsworth

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Abstract- Wordsworth was the greatest romantic poet of England. He was the prophet of Nature. He saw in Nature “both law and impulse”. His ultimate theme was not Nature but the heart and mind of Man. His temper was essentially democratic. Living in the democratic society of England, he had enjoyed the democratic atmosphere at Cambridge – one brotherhood of the scholars and the gentlemen. His democratic faith was more intensified when he became influenced by the ideals of the French Revolution and of the Philosophers of this revolution. These ideals were – liberty, fraternity, equality and natural law or justice. Though the political effects of this Revolution changed his mind, he remained always attached with its above ideals. It humanised his soul which began to sing ‘the sad music of humanity’ and ‘Man suffering among awful powers and forms’ and the dark world and cloud of human destiny – of the rustics and common man in the lap of Nature with her pleasures, joys, glees, blitheness and love with all true facts of life truthfully showing that misery and mirth make life complete on earth – and, man must flourish in the democratic climate of humanism – of love and service. His poetry breathe all the tenets of democracy when he pictures the sufferings of common man.

Keywords - Impulse, temper, democratic, intensified, liberty fraternity, equality, law, justice, humanism, sufferings.

I. INTRODUCTION

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was of revolutionary nature in his childhood. This nature remains continued within him upto the last period of his life. He was the greatest nature poet of England because he was the poet of more than external poet of England, because he was the poet of more than external Nature. The Nature of William Wordsworth is different from the Nature of Dryden and Pope. He revolted against the poetic theory

and manner of the Eighteenth century poets who depicted in their poetry the city life and people and the aristocratic manners. He was the leader of Romantic Movement in England. He did not picture city life and people in his poetry; rather he depicted the rustic life and Nature.

William Wordsworth was much more influenced by the French Revolution and Rousseau and Beaupuy for his democratic visions of life. The French revolution, Rousseau’s and Beaupuy’s political Philosophy of Liberty, Fraternity and Justice inspired his heart and mind, which he had been thinking of since his childhood. The factors of freedom, brotherhood and Natural justice of law were ignited within him when he went through the literatures of the above philosophers and also by seeing the effects of the French Revolution when he visited France in 1791.

Though he was tortured within by seeing the criminal activities of the revolutionaries who had been in powers, he was never against the democratic effects inspired by the revolution. There was a war between France and England and he was with France within, but this was against his country. France was defeated and the Girondists were hanged for their wrong deeds.

II. WORDSWORTH: A DEMOCRATIC TEMPERAMENT

Wordsworth had come to England and was not active with the view he had within, hence he was saved, but this does not mean that he was not a democrat. His temper was essentially democratic; he loved democratic ideas and freedom which England loved. Even at

Cambridge he had found a democratic atmosphere, which he presents in his 'The Prelude;'

We were brothers all.

In honors as in one community.

Scholars and gentlemen.[1]

Wordsworth is generally acknowledged as a poet of Nature. But he was a poet of Man also. The love of n Nature led him to the love of Man humanity at large. As he was a great personality who had lived in a democratic society and was much more influenced by the ideals of the French Revolution-Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and Natural justice, he depicted the simple rustic life of the peasants, the rustics, the shepherds, the mountain dwellers, pedlars the beggars, the leech gatherer and the ignorant and uncivilized who lived their simple lives in the midst of Nature and behaved as Nature taught them to behave. He worked upon this by testing human Nature in its elements-"By stripping our own hearts naked, and by looking out of ourselves towards men who lead the simplest lives and those most according to Nature, men who have never known false refinements wayward and artificial desires, effeminate ways of thing and feeling [2]."

The unique Thoughts of the French Revolution of liberty, equality and fraternity-which led him to love the sad music of humanity, and portray the things and objects of Nature for the redemption of mankind from sufferings they had have here. The elemental qualities of man- love ,simplicity, frugality, industry and all that go to make for manhood can be found only in the people who live in the rural areas or in the lap of Nature. Wordsworth regarded such people as part of Nature. Huts and slums delighted him. Rural surroundings comforted him. Cottages invited him. He found love 'in huts where poor men lie'. He thought these things to be the resorts of liberty, labour, love and simplicity.

III. NATURE AND COMPASSION

Resolution and Independence or The Leech-Gatherer is the most characteristic poem of his. Here he has gathered up all his qualities, dignity, homeliness,

and meditation over Man and Nature, respectful pity for old age and poverty, detailed observation of natural things, together with an imaginative atmosphere, which melts and harmonizes the forms of cloud and rock and pool and the voices of wind and man into a single composition. Here in this poem, Man is with Nature and Nature with Man and Nature has come to him in his search after everything that she has to say to us or show to us. Considering this point F.L. Lucas has observed rightly that in our hard age he still stands out in passionate opposition 'as one who vindicates unceasingly the freedom of soul not only of Shakespeare and Milton but even of leech-gatherers and old shepherds like Michael, the individual worth, to the eye of vision, of even the meanest flower, even the commonest cloud'. Likewise, S. Brook has expressed his view 'It is by his close and loving penetration into the realities and simplicities of human life that he makes his claim of human life on our reverence as a poet [4].

The ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity are the outcomes of the French Revolution and the poet was much more influenced by them. His democratic and human sympathies were always in his mind and in his works.

In the preface to the Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth has spoken about poetry and the poet. His declarations about poetry and the poet are remarkable and points of deep study for a final consideration. He says there it is Man who occupies the place of prominence. A poet is one who depicts Man's thought and passions and feelings. The poet's thoughts, passions and feelings and passions are 'the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men.' The poet is a man and in that capacity he has a great missions in human society, he has to carry everywhere with him 'relationship and love' among the men of society as he is 'the rock of defence for human nature and an upholder and preserver. The differences among men can only be found in their language and customs, climate and soil, yet the poet 'binds them together by passions and knowledge the vast empire of human

society, as it is spread over the whole earth and over all time. As a poet, Wordsworth also has depicted and pictured the thoughts, passions and feelings of human beings in his poetry when he comes in contact with-the world of men at Cambridge outside his familiar Lake district. In *The Prelude*, he has described how Nature was slowly leading him to love Man and pay reverence for him. He was inspired by the ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity and, hence, his human sympathies were aroused by these ideals and his vision was humanized. He became interested in the suffering and in the destiny of Man and the human condition on this earth. The unsophisticated perceptions and thoughts of peasantry, of children, of the rustic people of half-witted human creatures attracted his heart's attentions of humble reverence and gratitude to them.

The following passage, taken from the conclusion of the first book of **The Recluse**, may be considered to show or exhibit the humanistic visions of Wordsworth:-

‘On man, on Nature, and on Human Life,

Of truth, of Grandeur, Beauty, Love and Hope,

Of moral strength, and intellectual power;

Of the individual mind that keeps her own inviolate
retirement subject there
To conscience only, and the law supreme
Of that intelligence which governs all
I sing:-

The massacres in France had the effects which turned his faith in the French Revolution, but its effects remained intact in his mind. The peculiar human melody and vision of thought attracted him a lot. His experience in France, the moral crisis that he faced on his return from there and his contact with Michael Beaupuy humanized his soul and vision and built him into a poet of Man. His soul turned towards human sympathy and he did not live for looking in or at Nature only but to think for mankind. His love of mankind began to see the suffering of humanity and the

meagre of the mankind at large. He began to look upon Men from the stand point of a doctrine due to the influence of the French Revolution. The idea of one universal humanity began to replace the concern for particular phases of humanity. “The aching joy” the dizzy “raptures”, which he felt for Nature in the second stage of his poetic vision, were driven away by his listening to the still, sad music of humanity’.

IV. A UNIVERSAL POET

Though a great lover of Nature, William Wordsworth also had the realization of the innate dignity of man, and an aspiration for the universal brotherhood for men, and an opposition of the unfeeling arrangement and tyranny of society and government- the remarkable tenets and elements of democracy.

These are the leading ideas during this period. He speaks of the change, the realization and the reconciliation of the different situations into one by Nature.

Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows
Like harmony in music; there is a dark
Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles
Discordant elements makes them cling together
In one society,

This vision of clinging men ‘together in one society is always in his mind and we find this vision or idea also depicted in *The Prelude*. Book IX, where he says

.....we should see the earth
Unthwarted in her wish to recompense
The meek, the lowly, patient child of toil’

.....
.....
And finally, as sum and crown of all,
Should see the people having a strong hand
In framing their own laws: whence better days
To all mankind (The prelude, Book IX)

Wordsworth was always a true democrat as his birth and upbringing were in the democratic society of England. Though the effect of the French Revolution was always upon his mind and soul,

yet he had come into some sorts of illusions, gloom and utter desolation as a result of the later phase of French Revolution. His happy illusions and visions regarding Nature and Man were dispelled when the French War brought destructions, aggressions and massacres. Now to his eye Nature was not as golden as before. "The glory and the freshness of a dream' that she had in the beginning, was then departed from heart. Formerly 'meadows, grove and stream, the earth and every common sight, appeared to him 'apparelled in celestial light.' Now they were shorn of that splendor and appeared in the common light of day (**Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood**). All things were to him now as 'something that is gone,' and so he says:

Whether is fled the visionary gleam?

Where is it now, the glory and dream?

Things of Nature were as beautiful as before. Only they did not appear so beautiful to him:

The rainbow comes and goes.

And lovely is the rose:

But yet I know, where'er I go.

That there hath passed away a glory from the earth
[5]

Wordsworth returns to England 'with sorrow, disappointment vexing thoughts, confusion of the judgement' after seeing the French massacres- a 'war of self-defense for one conquest' (The Prelude, Book XI), being oppressed inwardly and remains in despairs and desolations for some time. Dorothy and Coleridge come to the rescue of the poet who begins to gain strength by having his philosophic mind and by having a renewal of love of Man and of sympathy with the suffering humanity, finding there spiritual truth and beauty.

In the primal sympathy

Which having been must ever be,

In the soothing thoughts that spring

Out of Human suffering

The poet of **The prelude** vows to teach others how Man and Nature, mind and the external world are geared and in unison complete the motive

principle of the universe, they act upon each- other so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure. Love for Nature is not as passionate as before. It is calmer now. There is now mixed with it the love of humanity. He has recognized now man's affinity with nature and feels the unifying spirit that runs through all things, whose dwelling is in.

The light of setting suns,

And the round ocean, and the living air,

And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:

A motion and a spirit, that impels

All thinking things, all objects of all thought

And rolls through all things

In this spirit of nature and the mind of man, there is pre-arranged harmony which leads to the contemplation of humanity through Nature.

Wordsworth, in course of his wanderings on the country roads came in contact with the humblest and simplest human beings. He became interested in the lives of the humblest and simplest human beings. He became interested in the lives of the so-called uncivilized, ignorant peasants, rustics, shepherds, Mountain-dwellers, who lived their simple lives in the midst of Nature and behaved as Nature taught them to behave.

V. WORDSWORTH'S HUMANISM

Wordsworth's humanism lies in the fact that he descends among cottages and fields and among children, specially the children of the poor, without their parents to look after them. In this matter his thoughts were colored with the ideas of Rousseau, Michael Beaupuy and the French revolution itself and Godwin within his own country. In Wordsworth's time, the English peasantry was being ruined by the advance of capitalism in agriculture and industrial revolution and development in England. Wordsworth saw, in this process, the decay of the morals of the entire nation and was against the development of the capitalists and the growth of industrial progress destroying the interest of the people of the countryside.

He criticized the land owners, the capitalists, the industrialists and the ruling class for their indifference to the fate of the dispossessed people. He sang of the love of independence among the small farmers and shepherds of England, whose strength and energy, simplicity and love suffering and mutual love and service had surprised him. He saw into the depths of human souls.

Souls that appear to have no depth at all

To Careless eyes.

And, he bent in reverence-

To Nature and the power of human minds,

To men as they are men within themselves.

Helen Derbyshire points out to this aspect of Wordsworth "The power that surprised him in tramps and beggars and outcast women was not the thing that Godwin valued in man. It was feeling not reason that Wordsworth found when he groped to the bottom. The elementary feelings, the essential passions of the heart are at their purest and simplest, he found, in humble and rustic life. These are the powers in human nature which are like the primal energies of Nature: their strength, force, and beauty seem to spring from the same source: through them man and Nature are one. This was his discovery. When he reached this truth, and it remained truth for him to the end, his mind had recovered its tone, his imagination was released, and the poetry of the Lyrical Ballads and the Lines composed above Tintern Abbey followed [6]."

VI. CONCLUSION

Wordsworth's humanistic visions of the strength, energy, simplicity, industry, frugality purity of heart and respect and love-the elemental qualities that go to make for true manhood-of the peasants and the poor attracted the poet in the poet and he drew spiritual strength in the midst of his own suffering. This social outlook determined the Nature of the content of many of the poems that he wrote in the glorious decade of his

poetic life. The above elemental qualities which he found such rustic people made him regard them as part of Nature. S. Brook says-"It is by his close and living penetration into the realities and simplicities of human life that he himself makes his claim on our reverence as a poet".[7]

Wordsworth deals with human nature and Nature in his poetry. His visions of the both are inter-related. He was not a philosopher like Rousseau, Locke, Hume, Spinoza, Berkeley, Kant or Newton or Godwin; but he was influenced by their thoughts and philosophical views. He tried his best to combine and put their ideas in his poetry which suited to his poetical outlooks and visions regarding human beings and mankind. As he was a democrat and had republican sympathies and was influenced by the ideals of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity of the French Revolution and also by the American war of independence, his human sympathies were aroused by these ideals and so, his visions were humanized. He got interested in the destiny of Man and the human condition on this earth specially the destiny and condition of the lowest stratum of society. Wordsworth's democratic visions seen in the 19th century are upheld even in this century.

VII. REFERENCES

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