

Humanitarian Aspects of Wordsworth

Kareed Faan

Department of English
University of Balochistan
Quetta
Pakistan

ABSTRACT

The sufferings and the oppression of the French people caused sorrow and concern in the heart of every sensitive soul in Europe. Wordsworth was one of the staunch supporters of the French Revolution. He had a close experience with the Revolution. But the tragic aftermath of the Reign of Terror and Napoleonic wars cooled his revolutionary zeal. Even though he never accepted political or social oppression, in the eyes of the radicals he became known as a traitor and an escapist. Wordsworth was not a traitor or an escapist. He was a humanitarian who throughout his life struggled for human welfare.

Introduction

The Romantic period in English literature coincides with the French Revolution. The Romanticists were influenced by the ideals of the Revolution. According to Day:...humanitarian sympathy was part of the ground-swell of radical political feeling in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the period which saw first the American War of Independence and then the French Revolution.' (Day:1996,12). The romanticists believed in equality and freedom of mankind. They were liberals, conservatives, rationalists, idealists, Catholics, atheists, revolutionaries and reactionaries. Shelley believed that man must be liberated from all kinds of oppression. He thrived with a craving to unshackle mankind from the clutches of morbidity and lack of liberty. This lent to his poetry an elemental force, a vehemence as vigorous as that of the Wild West Wind. The poem puts across Shelley's spirit of liberty which is tempestuous and prevailing as the West Wind itself. The poet addresses the west wind and beckons his spirit to descend upon him and act through his lips as the trumpet of a prophecy to the indifferent world. Shelley depicts the impact of the West wind on the dead leaves of autumn. They are driven by the west wind as ghosts fleeing from an enchanter. The wind forces them to their wintry bed where they will stay buried like a corpse till the clarion call of spring shall arouse them to a new life. It destroys the old decaying leaves. It scatters the seeds and thus preserves life. Likewise, the poet looks forward that the stagnant conventions die and make way for regeneration.

Godwin thought that nothing can hinder man in attaining perfection in life. Godwin's opinions, in Political Justice places human mind on elevation which commands a whole line

of moral consequences. Godwin is of the view that ‘Democracy is a system of government, according to which every member of society is considered as a man, and nothing more. So far as positive regulation is concerned, if indeed that can, with any propriety, be termed regulation, which is the mere recognition of the simplest of the moral principles, every man is regarded as equal. Talents and wealth, wherever they exist, will not fail to obtain a certain degree of influence, without requiring positive institution to second their operation....Democracy restores to man a consciousness of his value, teaches him, by the removal of authority and oppression, to listen only to the suggestions of reason, gives him confidence to treat all other men with frankness and simplicity, and induce him to regard them no longer, as enemies against him to assist. The citizen of a democratical state, when he looks upon the oppression and injustice that prevail in the countries around him, cannot but entertain an inexpressible esteem for the advantages he enjoy, and the most unalterable determination to preserve them....’(Godwin, Cited in; Dickinson,1974:204-205). Godwin absolves man from the gross and narrow ties of sense and customs.

Andrew Sanders in his book ‘The Short History Oxford History of English Literature’ writes that Godwin views human happiness and social well being as the sole purpose of existence, but unlike Rousseau he looks forward to a gradual melting away of all government to be replaced by a new system of radical anarchy. A rigid adherence to the leading principle of reason is substituted for Rousseau’s cult sensibility and his innate religiosity. Law government, property, inequality and marriage would be abolished as part of a gradual process by which human perfectibility, conditioned by human reason, would transcend existing limitations and impediments to fulfilled happiness.’ (Sanders, 1994:342) Godwin’s hatred for all forms of injustice is reflected in his novels such as *Adventures Of Caleb Williams*. The novel depicts the problems of class distinction and the nature of oppression. Godwin is less concerned with the authority of the state and more with the exercise of power by a privileged class. Caleb Williams, hero of the novel, imprisoned by one of the persecutor exclaims ‘Is that a country of liberty where thousands languish in dungeons and fetters? Go, go ignorant fool! and visit the scenes of our prisons! Witness their unwholesome, their filth, the tyranny of their governors, the misery of their inmates!’ (Cited in Sanders, 1994:342). Caleb’s character plays the role of a critic and points out the ills of English society adding to it a penetrating radical colour.

For Burke the French Revolution was the most astonishing event that happened in the world. During the American Revolution he was leader of the liberals and believed that the revolution of 1688 is :most wise, sober, and considerate declaration, ‘drawn up by great Lawyers and great statesmen, and not by warm and inexperienced enthusiasts....to choose our own governor; to cashier them for misconduct ; and to form a government for ourselves...The revolution was made to preserve our ancient constitution of government which is our only security for law and liberty’ (Burke, Cited in Dickinson,1974:177). Burke took French Revolution as his worst enemy and in the course of this campaign he made a major contribution to political philosophy. He declared that the doctrines of the French Revolution would spread beyond the frontiers of France and subvert the foundations of existing political institutions and social order. He pointed out the danger of all attempts to alter suddenly the institutions of nation. He thought

that the French had proved themselves a great destructive force; they had destroyed their government and their church, and stuck a dangerous blow at the rights of property. Burke was revolted by the triumph of mob over a most lawful and mild king, treating him with more fury and insult than ever raised against any unlawful monarch.

Burke says that 'Our political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world, and which the mode of existence decreed to a permanent body composed of transitory parts; wherein, by the disposition of a stupendous wisdom, moulding together the great mysterious incorporation of the human race, the whole, at one time, is never old, or middle aged, or young, but, in a condition of unchangeable constancy, moves on through the varied tenor of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression. Thus, by preserving the method of nature in the conduct of the state, in what we improve, we are never wholly new; in what we retain, we are never wholly new; in what we retain, we are never wholly obsolete. By adhering in this manner not by the superstition of antiquarians, but by the spirit of philosophic analogy.....(Burke cited in Dickinson:1974:178). In *Reflections on the Revolution in France* he writes: 'I flatter myself that I love a manly, moral, regulated liberty as well as any gentleman...But I cannot stand forward, and give praise or blame to anything which relates to human actions, and human concerns, on a simple view of the objects, as it stands stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstractions.

By the blind Goddess; ruthless, undismayed; And so hath gained at length a prosperous Height, Round which the Elements of worldly might Beneath his haughty feet, like clouds, are laid. O joyless power that stands by lawless force! Curses are his dire portion, scorn, and hate Internal darkness and unquiet breath; And, if old judgments keep their sacred course, Him from that Height shall Heaven precipitate By violent and ignominious death. After the failure of the French revolution, Wordsworth became mentally disturbed because he realized that his belief in the Golden Age was ending in horror and atrocities in . He blamed the French people for Napoleon's rise to power in Calais, August, 1802, he says: Ye men of prostrate mind, A seemly reverence may be Lamenting the time in *The Prelude* and writes: It was a lamentable time for man Whether a hope had e'er been his or not, A woeful time for them whose hopes did still Out last the shock; most woeful for those few, They had the deepest feeling of the grief, Who still were flattered, and had trust in man. (BK X,387-392) Purkis is of the view that 'Wordsworth was intensely politically conscious all his life; he may have changed sides, but he never lost interest in the battle. He is indeed the most political of all our poets and this is hardly surprising when we remember that he grew up in an age of Revolutions.' (Purkis, 2003:20). Wordsworth had witnessed enough of bloodshed and horror in France. He accepts conservatism and follows the principles advocated by Edmund Burke. He realized that like an oak Burke's constitution was organic, time honored, slow to change and grow, protective of the subjects who sheltered beneath it. He compares Burke to an oak tree, acknowledging the power of his symbol as an anti- revolutionary- a conservative. In *The Prelude* he says: I see him,- old but vigorous in age, Stand like an oak whose stag-horn branches start Out of its leafy crown, the more to awe The younger brothern of the grove.

While he forewarns, denounces, launches forth, Against all systems built on abstract rights, Keen ridicule; the majesty proclaims Of institutes and laws, hallowed by time; Declares

the vital powers of social ties Endeared by custom; and with high disdain, Exploding upstart. As a conservative Wordsworth preaches that there must be respect for institutions, tradition, religion and judgment of community because it is formed after thousands of experiments in the great laboratory of time. Change, for Wordsworth includes no risk of a chaotic social order, but instead entails gradual orderly progress towards a better society. Go slow he warns the advocates of change. Wordsworth does not like volcanic burst and of violent upheaval. He advises the people of England in the following words: Long favored England! Be not thou misled By monstrous theories of alien growth Lest alien frenzy seize thee.

Conclusion

For Wordsworth Ideals of freedom remained unattained. Thousands of lives sacrificed in the name of liberty and equality appeared futile as the revolution was followed by the violence of the Reign of Terror and imperialism of Napoleon. He was no more an impatient republican. He believed that a gradual progress bring peace and prosperity in life and violent changes cause disturbance and destruction of humanity. Wordsworth returned to the Lake District. In his sonnet Composed in the Valley near Dover, on the Day of Landing, Wordsworth contrasts the enslavement of Europe with the political freedom still prevailing in his own country. The sonnet speaks of the relief with which he again sets foot on English soil. He expresses his satisfaction in the following lines: All, all are English. Oft have I looked round With joy in Kent's green vales; but never found Myself so satisfied in heart before. Europe is yet in bonds; but let that pass, Thought for another moment. Thou art free, My Country! And 'tis joy enough and pride For one hour's perfect bliss, to tread the grass Of England once again.

References

- Adian Day: Romanticism, (London: Routledge: 1996).
- Adian Day: Romanticism, (London: Routledge: 1996)127 J.H. Walsh,ed; Wordsworth, William Wordsworth: Selection From His Poetry, (London: Chatto And Windus (Educational Ltd:1968)10.
- Andrew Sanders, The Short Oxford History of English Literature, (United States:Oxford University Press:2004)342.
- Dickinson, ed; Burke, Politics and Literature, (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd: 1974)177
ibid, 178 ibid, 177-178.
- Dickinson, ed;Paine, Politics and Literature, (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd: 1974) 183
ibid, 204-205.
- F. B Pinion, A Wordsworth Champion, (London, The Macmillian Press Ltd:1984)34.
- F. B Pinion, A Wordsworth Champion, (London, The Macmillian Press Ltd:1984)35.
- Kenneth R.Johnston, The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet. Lover. Rebel. Spy, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc:1998)302.
- Purkis: Wordsworth, (India: Pearson Education Ltd:2003) 22.