

# FEMINISM, CENSORSHIP AND OTHER ESSAYS

**K.K. SHARMA**

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**This book**, consisting of nine essays, deals with a variety of themes in relation to different literary forms in English and Hindi. The first two articles aim at discussing succinctly two issues of international importance, viz. feminism and censorship. The next two are an attempt to examine the poetics of two illustrious poets of two different nations and times, i.e. Sri Aurobindo of India of the first half of the twentieth century and Robert Duncan belonging to America of the second half of the preceding century. Then there are two critical pieces on the celebrated Indian English poetess, Sarojini Naidu. The waning reputation of the most influential prose writer and prophet of the nineteenth-century England, Thomas Carlyle, gets a serious consideration in the seventh article of this collection. The last two essays of the volume are devoted to two outstanding Hindi writers of two different periods — Bihari, a truly representative poet of the later Medieval India, and Jayashankar Prasad, the most versatile and significant literary luminary of the twentieth century. Obviously, the book treats a wide range of subject matter, and therefore will be interesting and stimulating to a large reading public as well as academics both in India and abroad.

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

Preface i

1 Feminism: A Critical Introduction 1

2 Censorship and Freedom of Mind:  
Some Reflections 17

3 Poetry as "The Mantra of the Real":  
A Note on Sri Aurobindo's Poetics 26

4 Poetry as an "Exposed, Open Form":  
Robert Duncan's Poetics 42

5 Sarojini Naidu: A Preface to Her Poetry 55

6 Challenge to Fate in Sarojini Naidu's Poetry 71

7 The Waning Reputation of Thomas Carlyle 80

8 Bihari's Philosophy of Life 94

9 Jayashankar Prasad's Fiction:  
An Assessment 107

Index 136

GRATEFULLY DEDICATED TO

DR. R.B.L. GOSWAMI

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## Preface

The present book, consisting of nine essays, deals with a variety of themes and authors in relation to different literary forms in English and Hindi. The first two articles aim at discussing succinctly two age-old controversial issues of vital, international importance, viz. feminism and censorship, with reference to varied countries and periods. The next two are an attempt to examine compactly and quite comprehensively the poetics of two illustrious poets of two different nations and times, i.e. Sri Aurobindo of India of the first half of the twentieth century and Robert Duncan belonging to America of the second half of the preceding century. Then there are two critical pieces on the celebrated Indian English poetess, Sarojini Naidu. The waning reputation of the most influential prose writer and prophet of the nineteenth-century England, Thomas Carlyle, gets a serious consideration in the seventh article of this collection. The last two essays of the volume are devoted to two outstanding Hindi writers of two different periods — Bihari, a truly representative poet of the later Medieval India, and Jayashankar Prasad, the most versatile and significant literary luminary of the twentieth-century Hindi literature. Obviously, the book treats a wide range of subject matter critically with utmost impartiality and empathy, and therefore it is hoped that it will catch the attention of a large reading public in India and abroad, and will be interesting and stimulating to the academics as well.

March 2003

K. K. Sharma

## FEMINISM: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Many people today feel that feminism has almost come to an end because it has nearly won the war at most of the fronts by achieving for women equality with men in all walks of life — political, social, economic, etc.<sup>1</sup> But the fact is that the feminist movement is still going quite strong all the world over with the prospects of getting stronger in the near future, displaying, as Elaine Showalter observes, the “urgency and excitement of a religious awakening.”<sup>2</sup> This is evident from the recent successful World Conferences for the well-being of women held in China, and also from the mushrooming of all kinds of writings on and by women. No doubt, at the beginning of the present century feminism has lost some of the punch, edge and fervour of the 1960's and 1970's in advanced countries like France, America, England, etc.; but it is spreading in most of the countries of Third World like wildfire. Hence the need to ponder over it and discuss it so as to make it really meaningful and to rescue it from going astray into a sheer gender war “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” The present paper is an effort in this direction.

### I

For a correct comprehension of the emergence of feminism as a self-conscious and concerted approach to life and literature during the past four decades or so, it is necessary to have the historical perspective of it. The outburst of feminism in 1960s throughout the world, particularly in the advanced West was not a matter of chance, but the natural corollary of centuries of struggle for women's rights. In this context, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of a Woman* ( 1792) is the first landmark which can be regarded as the manifesto of modern feminism. Incidentally, in the same period some women writers in England — Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen and others —

came out of the obscure, suffocating feminine shell and presented life and art from the point of view of women. They accentuated the importance of social life centred upon women, and demonstrated it as important a subject matter as any other so far treated in literature. Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* ( 1845) and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* ( 1869) are other milestones of modern women's path for emancipation for self-realisation, self-definition and self-assertion. In the twentieth century Virginia Woolf can be regarded as the first avowed champion of feminism. *A Room of One's Own* ( 1929) and her numerous essays collected later on under the title *Women and Writing* are an open attack on patriarchal society, which, in her view, is the root cause of educational, economic and cultural backwardness and disabilities hampering women's creative, cultural and social growth and stature.

However, it was *The Second Sex* ( 1949) by the French woman writer, Simone de Beauvoir, that brought about a revolution and a sea change in western society, and thus it can be rightly regarded as the true foundation of the present-day feminism. This radical book is a powerful and comprehensive critique of the age-old cultural belief in woman as simply "the negative Object," and man as "the defining, central Subject," representing the entire humanity. In America modern feminism began with the publication of Mary Ellman's persuasive book, *Thinking about Women*, in 1968, and it was followed by Kate Millett's hard-hitting, influential work, *Sexual Politics* ( 1969) which exposes Freud's male prejudices and some novelists' degrading presentation of women as objects of sheer sexual gratification. She is vehemently critical of the social system giving men power to perpetuate their unjust domination over women and the latter's miserable subjugation. After the first appearance of these two books, there has been a spate of feminist literature and activities all the world over.

Though in its modern sense feminism, as pointed out earlier, became conspicuous for the first time in the eighteenth century, its seeds are as old as human race. In the West, it was apparent in the first woman of the world, Eve, in that by tasting the fruit

of the forbidden tree of knowledge in the garden of Eden she defied the male ruler of the universe, i.e. God, and prevailed upon her husband, Adam. She rebelliously came out of the prison of complete ignorance to the open-air world of knowledge, no matter she had to face terrible punishment for its sake by way of bartering the blissful seat of paradise for all the woes of the earthly existence. In India, it is not only as old as Sita whom several scholars discuss in this context,<sup>3</sup> but can also be seen clearly in Sati, the first wife of Lord Shiva, who, though truly reverent and devoted to her husband, defied him and his claimed monopoly on knowledge by testing Rama to know herself whether or not the latter was Vishnu — the supreme God — whom even Shiva regarded as his Lord. Again, Sati not only set aside her husband's wish and advice by going to participate in the *yagya* organised by her father but there she, though mainly because of the insult to her and her husband, challenged and tried to end patriarchy by jumping into the sacred pyre of the *yagya* and thus burning herself to death.

A close scrutiny of the genesis of feminism — woman's voice against injustice and inequality — tends to unravel the fact that feminism is the consequence of the culture or society shaped and governed by men to suit their needs and interests regardless of women's basic needs and happiness. Obviously, the question arises: why and how could such a society come into existence? The answer is not far to seek. Bread and physical protection were the basic cause of it. At the beginning, human beings must have confronted with only two problems — satiation of hunger and physical protection. Man, being physically stronger by natural laws in comparison with woman who is comparatively frail and tender and who is not fully fit to work hard on all days due to menstruation, pregnancy and the responsibilities of child-bearing and nurturing, was forced by the day-to-day circumstances and needs to earn bread to survive and to protect himself and his woman and children against all kinds of dangers and threats from wild animals, natural calamities and other human beings. Thus man, right from the beginning of life when intellectuality was not

of much value and relevance, became the nucleus of human existence on this planet, and this made him so important and indispensable that he, out of sheer selfishness which governs all creatures in the universe, including the so-called gods, set up a social system absolutely suited to him, deifying himself and relegating all other subservient to him. Physical strength ( for in the initial stage of life on the earth "might was right" and this continued for centuries) enabled him to wield power and influence on others, and thus power politics came into being, giving birth to a patriarchal, male-dominated society.

## II

After a bird's-eye view of the origin and growth of feminism, let us see what does this much debated 'ism' mean? Here we should keep in mind the fact that feminism is different from 'femininity' and 'femaleness.' Explaining the different connotations of these three terms, Toril Moi rightly states: "In a general way, I see 'feminism' as a political position, 'femaleness' as a matter of biology, and 'femininity' as a set of culturally defined characteristics."<sup>4</sup> Unlike most of the 'isms' of the present century, generally marked by complexity and obscurity, it is not difficult to comprehend and interpret what 'feminism' stands for. Simplistically speaking, 'feminism' means the doctrine which advocates for woman's complete equality with man in all spheres of life — political, social, legal, economic, familial, cultural, academic, etc. — and the feminist movement is an organised effort for achieving such an equality and rights for women. In other words, it aims at providing women with full freedom in all respects — sexual, professional, personal, educational, political, cultural, religious, etc. —, and thus liberating them from all conventional, cultural and political restrictions. However, feminism, in the general non-literary sense of the term, has a number of implications, which are explained and summed up by Agate Nesaule Krouse in these words:

In its general, non-literary applications, feminism has a number of different meanings and connotations. Thus, man-haters, lesbians, believers in free love,

nymphomaniacs, and career women have occasionally been loosely described as feminists because they reject, consciously or unconsciously, the traditional definition of a woman as one who finds her highest happiness in loving and being faithful to one man, living through his achievements, having children, or making a home. All of the following have been more precisely described as feminists: the great nineteenth-century advocates of women's rights; suffragists; contemporary women interested or active in the Women's Movement; members of one of the liberal, socialist, or radical feminist groups; authors of theoretical books or essays which expose sexism or injustices to women, or which explore ways women can achieve justice and full humanity. A characteristic common to members of this group is that they advocate or support greater freedom or equal rights for women in politics, education, employment, or personal life. In so doing, they also question or reject in various ways traditional definitions of the nature or roles of women....<sup>5</sup>

Different from these general connotations of feminism is literary feminism, which stands for a work having a woman protagonist or having several women characters as central to the basic theme or action. This type of work can be authored by both women and men, and not necessarily by women only. Literary feminism, as Agate Nesaule Krouse rightly avers, "is indirectly of service to the feminist cause because it provides documentation that the traditional definitions of women are inadequate or that women suffer injustices because of their sex. It need not deal with feminists themselves nor does it need to provide a positive blueprint for the reform of society."<sup>6</sup>

Literary feminism may be of two kinds — explicit and implicit. The first focuses on the writer's explicit intention to reveal some significant aspect of sexism and his concern with the problems and hardships faced by women who endeavour to transcend the male-created patriarchal societal system. A lot of this kind of writing came out even in the period between 1890 and 1955. Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did* ( 1895) , Willa Calher's *O Pioneers!* ( 1913) , David Philipp's *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* ( 1917) and Margaret Culkin Banning's *The Dowry* ( 1954) are some such works besides the masterpieces of Ellen Glasgow, Edith Wharton and of poets like Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sara Theasdale and Elinor Wylie. This was due to the impact of the growing women's movement on the literature of the time. In addition

to the explicit feminist works, there is always a literature with deliberate, oblique approaches to feminism or 'the woman question' even by avowed feminists. Larzer Ziff illustrates the implicit literary feminism from the writings of Constance Cary Harrison, Gertrude Atherton and others who, towards the end of the last century, for the sake of more freedom for women, "dealt with a heroine who had two successive marriages. The first was the crucial one, and the dependence upon men was attacked as the marriage's inadequacies were detailed."<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding the oblong delineation of feminism, *Jude the Obscure*, *Ruth* and *Esther Waters* by Hardy, Mrs. Gaskell and George Moore respectively were condemned as patriarchal rubbish.

Annis Pratt points to another very interesting variety of literary feminism which she calls encyclopaedic. She exemplifies it from the works of Doris Lessing, Dorothy Richardson and Katherine Anne Porter who painstakingly deal with woman's fundamental problems along with larger human issues and relationships. To quote her own words:

...in Lessing's *Children of Violence* novels, Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools* and, to a slightly lesser extent, Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, we are dealing with a fiction which includes a brilliant exploration of woman's existential situation *within* a carefully orchestrated treatment of other broader human conflicts and relationships — a genre which I would define as encyclopedic feminism.<sup>8</sup>

Ellen Morgan draws our attention to a new type of feminism which she names neo-feminism. Defining it, she says that it considers woman as a person "in the process of becoming ... struggling to throw off her conditioning and the whole psychology of oppression."<sup>9</sup> She holds that this view of woman cannot be presented adequately and effectively through the psychological and sociological literary works, and that neo-feminism has influenced most three kinds of literature — i.e., the historical novel, the propaganda literature and the *Bildungsroman*. *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*, *Fear of Flying*, *Small Changes*, etc. are brilliant instances of neo-feminist literature. Neo-feminism, according to Ellen Morgan, aims at exploring the possibilities for woman to "achieve authentic selfhood" and to experience "what it is like to live as free and fully human female being."<sup>10</sup>

Then there are some other forms of feminism, besides those related specifically to some nations or continents — viz. French feminism, American feminism, Afro-American feminism, African feminism, English feminism, Australian feminism, Italian feminism, Canadian feminism, Third World feminism, etc. —, and some of these are described succinctly by Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean in their brilliant recent study, *Materialist Feminism*.<sup>11</sup> They lucidly discuss certain specific feminist positions, such as liberal, radical separatism and socialist. Liberal feminism implies that women's oppression can come to an end only when they are able to have legal equality and equal opportunity with men. On the other hand, radical feminism states the view that the idea of equal rights or legal equality is not enough to end women's oppression; what is absolutely essential to deliver good to women is to uproot and replace all existing social and political institutions, for women's real malady lies in men's power over them which is deeply rooted in all existing social structures, and hence it cannot be remedied without a complete transformation of society. Inevitably, radical feminism leads to feminist separatism which seeks to establish separate institutions and communities exclusively for women, giving no place to men in them. Differing from the above-mentioned feminist approaches, socialist feminism stresses the need for the eradication of class oppressions and economic inequalities of the capitalist society, for without it even the achieved goal of radical feminism will be a mere fiasco. This brand of feminism points to a clear-cut distinction between the formal, legal concept of equality and the substantive one, viz. economic and social.<sup>12</sup>

Psychology has interpreted feminism in its own terms. Differing from the above views on feminism which are political, social, economic, etc., psychoanalytical feminism, though at times overlapping with socialist feminism, is primarily based on Freud's stress on "the instability of sexual identities," and approaches the notion of gender as a problem. It is a fact that the true femaleness and maleness are not fully attainable permanently, and this suggests a comparative openness which allows changes in them. In the

light of the foregoing discussion, it can be maintained that feminism, to a large extent, is inevitably an interdisciplinary approach to psychology, sociology, politics, philosophy, economics, literature, etc.

Apparently, feminism is all-pervasive now, and therefore it is not surprising that the feminist critics have analysed even the Gothic novels from this angle. They try to demonstrate that women writers of the Gothic literature from Mrs. Radcliffe down to the present times, particularly the American Gothic fictionists of the forties, have employed this typical fictional mode with the specific intention, though not always patent, of unravelling the suppressed and repressed female sexuality in a male-dominated society, and of revealing analytically the way these women writers have assailed the sexual superiority and values of the so-called superior sex. In this context, the collection of essays edited by Juliann E. Fleenor under the title *The Female Gothic* (1983) and the book, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, are noteworthy.

### III

The above brief discussion of the genesis, growth, general definition and prominent types of feminism leads us to infer that there is no one definite concept of feminism because the feminist thinkers, though out and out dedicated champions of feminism, have different approaches to the problem. In fact, what seems to me is that feminism is still in a process of evolution to attain a definite entity, and thus we have only feminisms, and not anything like feminism — that is, it exists as a plural entity, and not as a singular one. This is evident from the large variety of titles, with a stable and objective meaning, of the books flooding the market everywhere. This fact is put playfully with a tinge of bitterness by the celebrated English feminist novelist Rebecca West in these words: "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that other people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat

or a prostitute."<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the feminist position (of course, not feminism) can be described, in the simplest possible manner, as a woman's assertive resistance to exploitation of any kind and to her being used as a mere doll or tool by men. It has certainly assumed the position of an ideology to achieve this end. Apropos of this Robyn R. Warhol affirms:

Feminism can be thought of as an ideology (that is, an intellectual system for explaining why things are the way they are) that has operated in political and social theory, epistemology, psychology, and psychoanalysis, spiritual and religious studies, linguistics, cultural studies, literary theory and criticism, and daily experience for at least as long as the United States of America has existed.<sup>14</sup>

No doubt, feminism is not a unitary theory or procedure, but we can grasp the essence as well as the vesture, the body as well as the soul, of variegated feminisms by a correct understanding of the basic terms used by the feminist thinkers — terms like patriarchy, sex, gender, politics, margin, etc. Most important of these terms is patriarchy. The feminists attack human civilization because it is patriarchal, that is, it is ruled by the father and hence male-centred and male-controlled. Men organize it in such a way as to make women their subordinate in all spheres of life — familial, religious, economic, social, political, artistic, educational, professional, legal, etc. In this patriarchal system women are socialized in such a way as they naturally imbibe, both consciously and unconsciously, the fundamental principle of patriarchal ideology — i.e., male superiority — and are thus made to contribute willingly to their subordination to men. In a word, patriarchy is a system, prevalent throughout the world, by means of which societies and cultures operate to privilege men and oppress women. And this patriarchy, as Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* rightly points out, is created historically, and not biologically — viz. it is the product of human history created and dominated by men. Literally, patriarchy is a type of community governed by the father with male being the descendent. But most of the feminist theory has discerned and accentuated the wide and varied implications of patriarchy, covering almost all kinds of male-domination. Barrett and McIntosh attack patriarchy, which is de-

scribed in its wider sense as “patriarchal social relations,” which cause women’s oppression because they yoke “a public dimension of power, exploitation or status with a dimension of personal servility,” or, in other words, combine “public and formal power with private and personal servitude.”<sup>15</sup> Elaborating the concept of puissant, irresistible patriarchal power and the belief that it is at the root of all misfortunes, exploitations, injustices and inequalities in the lives of women the world over, Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean write:

The operations of patriarchal power through gender, structures of emotion and effect, sexuality, notions of duty and dependency, and the profound bonds and antagonisms typical of relationships of intimate obligation, make this form of power hard to track. In heterosexual relationships, families, households, and workplaces specifically, patriarchal power proves hard to untangle. This complex interweaving of power in its public and most deeply private forms makes patriarchal power specially difficult to resist.<sup>16</sup>

While the implications of the words feminism and woman are still indeterminate and debatable, the connotations of the two key terms of the feminist theory — sex and gender and their corresponding terms female/male and feminine/masculine — are universally acceptable. One’s sex is determined by anatomy, and it refers to the biological division of human beings into male and female on the basis of strikingly distinct physical features — viz. while a male has a penis, a female has a vagina and uterus; while a male does not menstruate, a female does. Unlike sex, gender is based not on biology or anatomy but entirely on cultural notions enunciated by the patriarchal civilization. No wonder Simone de Beauvoir asserts that woman is “made, not born” — i.e. the creature called feminine is purely the product of male-oriented civilization.<sup>17</sup> The result is that the masculine and the feminine are forced by our culture to develop naturally different qualities of head and heart. According to our culture, while the masculine gender is marked by traits like intelligence, ambition, aggressiveness, etc., the feminine gender is supposed to have intuition, nurturing, self-effacement, etc. M.H. Abrams sums up these divergent traits thus:

... the masculine in our culture has come to be identified as active, dominating,

adventurous, rational, creative; the feminine, by systematic opposition to such traits, has come to be identified as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional, and conventional.<sup>18</sup>

The gender-bias is apparent in literary works. The “masculinist” ideology and culture are at the centre of the so-called great works of literature, mostly written by men. This is reason why the highly acclaimed writings are generally centred upon male protagonists without autonomous female characters. Obviously, these writings are replete with masculine assumptions and interests, and hence gender-biased.

One thing more about sex and gender. According to the feminist theory, sex does not mean sexuality of sexual preference which stands for a person’s pattern of erotic attraction. Likewise, gender does not apparently correspond to sexuality, for, as Robyn R. Warhol affirms,

... a person of the female sex who is erotically attracted primarily to persons of her own sex ( who may or may not refer as lesbian, another term whose definition is under debate within feminism) might be either strongly feminine or strongly masculine in her gendered self-presentation, or — most likely — her gender identity would, like most homosexual persons, be made up of a complicated combination of gender “differences within.”<sup>19</sup>

The focus of feminism in the late 1980’s has been on gender theory which, as Elaine Showalter points out, insists that all “reading and writing, by men as well as by women, is marked by gender.”<sup>20</sup> Naturally, gender is very important for the production and assessment of a work.

Politics is another key word used by the feminists to explain their viewpoints. As a matter of fact, both the words ‘feminism’ and ‘feminist,’ as Toril Moi avers, “are political labels indicating support for the aims of women’s movement.”<sup>21</sup> Since feminism is a political position, “a specific kind of political discourse: a theoretical and political practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism,”<sup>22</sup> the word ‘politics’ is to be understood rightly for the full, correct comprehension of feminism. The feminists assert that politics stands for something much more than merely governmental or electoral, for it, in fact, must include every action or thing influencing power relations. Politics, as Margaret

Atwood explains it, is about power and man's grabbing and using it — “who's got it, who wants it, how it operates: in a word, who's allowed to do what to whom, who gets what from whom, who gets away with it and how.”<sup>23</sup> Feminism propounds the view that “the personal is political,” that politics is power which is everywhere, and not in the state alone, and that power lies in the total effect of the cultural, social, economic and political traditions of a community. This is the reason why some of the feminist studies have titles like *Sexual Politics*, *Gender Politics*, *The Politics of Truth*, *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, etc.

Feminist scholarship uses the term margin quite frequently to explain its stance. It painfully maintains that female experiences have only formed the margins of historical, social, political and literary world because of the patriarchal societal set-up. Since the 1970s, women have been protesting and revolting against this, and have been making all possible efforts to place themselves and their works in the centre of society and to show that the erstwhile margin is the new actual centre of human life; now the marginalized women try to marginalize men. In short, feminism sets forth the belief that men have controlled and created history, politics and culture, and in so doing have, to quote the words of Catherine Stimpson, “relegated women, as women, to the margins of culture, if not to silence and invisibility.”<sup>24</sup>

#### IV

The foregoing discussion fully brings out the main planks of the feminist movement, but the most important question still remains to be considered — i.e. what is, or should be, the ultimate goal of feminism? Frantic, concerted efforts for decades to achieve for women equality with men in all spheres of life, and independence of all types — economic, political, social, sexual, personal, etc. — are only means to an end, and not an end in themselves. Obviously, let us try to see clearly the actual end of feminism, for only then it can be meaningful and useful for

women and humanity as a whole. The feminist protest against manifold oppressions and exploitation should only be a means to an end. For, it is true that traditional roles of woman as simply obedient girl, mistress and mother, wholly dependent on man — father, brother, husband or son — for everything are an anachronism now; earlier in woman self-sacrifice was preferred to self-realisation and self-fulfilment, but the situation is now reversed. The ultimate goal of feminism should be to enable woman to achieve self-realisation, self-definition, self-actualisation, self-emancipation, self-fulfilment, etc. by having freedom of choice — i.e. freedom to live a life of her own. The feminist protest and militancy, taking the shape of warfare, is undesirable and unhelpful for the cause of woman's self-fulfilment and full development of her varied faculties — physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, etc. In fact, feminism should mean the march towards ‘wholeness’ through resistance, resilience and determination, and not simply a war against patriarchy, etc.; it should aim at seeking authentic selfhood or personhood, and not simple, traditional womanhood.

True, feminism aims at grabbing power — viz. the position to dictate and direct action and thinking of others — from men, and it is possible because in modern times economic strength is all powerful and this can be achieved through intellect rather than through physical strength alone as was possible in olden days. If one has outstanding intellectual powers, one can earn a lot of money and can acquire power of every kind — social, political, etc. America is a glaring instance of this; one can have the best possible bread, weapons and means of protection through money power. Since women can earn a lot and can be economically strong by virtue of intellectuality and education, they can rush into the fray for power, and can fight for gender equality or even better position. But economic power and independence, imparting woman freedom of every kind, cannot give her satisfaction and inner happiness; she needs a man's loving company, and thus feminism cannot be anti-male and cannot be contented with lesbianism. It is almost impossible for feminism to attain its goal of

complete equality, for no man-woman relationship can exist, in its true essence, on the principle of absolute equality. But woman must strive for an honourable relationship with man in which she can find both true love and herself, and thus a promise and hope for the future. Indeed, woman's search for true individuality and fulfilment as woman lies in her harmonious, honourable living with her husband and children, and it is this which can help most to achieve her true selfhood or personhood. If feminism is based on the wrong attitude of hostility towards man, it will fizzle out, for the two genders are not only complementary and supplementary to each other but also absolutely indispensable for each other for full growth and fulfilment, and hence a headlong clash between them means social anarchy, moral depravity, collapse of all values and ultimately annihilation of mankind. In a word, feminism must deal with the 'Woman Question' in all its aspects — viz. all the issues pertaining to the full growth and welfare of women. Since the feminist movement till to-day does not have a common, well-accepted positive ideology, ultimate goal and right direction, I am afraid if it will ever be able to make earth a blissful seat for women in particular, and for mankind in general. Ann Curthoys, the well-known Australian feminist thinker, seems to voice my apprehensions thus:

Many feminists are in the process of defining their dissatisfaction with the women's movement as it is.... There is dissatisfaction with many of the women's centres and services set up by the movement, dissatisfaction that as the woman's movement grows in size it is diluting its perspectives, programs, and aims. These dissatisfactions can be summed up as a loss of direction which itself is a losing sight of our ends, our ultimate goals. We have not, that is to say, a clear notion of our feminist utopia.<sup>25</sup>

## Notes and References

<sup>1</sup>Apropos of this Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean state:

...many people are proclaiming the end of socialism and the end of feminism. The difference between these ends is that socialism is said to have failed in its competition with the capitalist marketplace, while feminism is said to have won all its battles. Women, we are told, have already gained the opportunities for social and economic power they were seeking, so there is no longer any need for feminist

movement. ( "The Argument," *Materialist Feminisms* [Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993], p.VII) .

Again, Linda Kauffman observes: " ...some of the most prominent feminist literary critics nonetheless feel that the force of feminism has been consistently blunted." ( *Gender and Theory*[Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990], p.1) .

<sup>2</sup>Elaine Showalter ( ed.) , *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*( New York: Pantheon, 1985) , p.4.

<sup>3</sup>For instance, R.S. Tiwary points out that Sita in the *Ramayana* of Valmiki displays feminist assertion of identity by setting at naught Rama's pleadings and persuasions for not accompanying him to the forest, though her feminism does not transcend the bounds of tradition. ( *Feminism and Literature*, ed. K.K. Sharma [Delhi: K.K. Publications, 1996], p.114) .

However, Chaman Nahal interprets Sita's life and deeds in another way: "What about Sita herself? Though Sita is normally cited as an example of anti-feminism, of submission, Sita must have been very courageous to have resisted a man like Ravana..." ( "Feminism in English Fiction: Forms and Variations," *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*, ed. Sushila Singh [New Delhi: Prestige, 1991], pp.14-5) .

<sup>4</sup>Toril Moi, "Men Against Patriarchy," *Gender and Theory*, ed. Linda Kauffman ( Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) , p.182.

<sup>5</sup>Agate Nesaule Krouse, "Feminism Prose Criticism," *Feminist Criticism: Essays on Theory, Poetry and Prose*, eds. Cheryl L. Brown and Karen Olson ( Metuchen, N. J. & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1978) , pp. 281-82.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p.282.

<sup>7</sup>Larzer Ziff, *The American 1890s*( New York: Viking Press, 1961) , p.279.

<sup>8</sup>Annis Pratt, "Theoretical Feminist Criticism," *Feminist Criticism*, eds. Cheryl L. Brown and Karen Olson, p.14.

<sup>9</sup>Ellen Morgan, "Humanbecoming: Form and Focus in the Neo-Feminist Novel," *Feminist Criticism*, p.272.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p.277.

<sup>11</sup>*Materialist Feminisms*, pp.2-3.

<sup>12</sup>For this, see *Feminism and Equality*, ed. Anne Phillips ( New York: New York University Press, 1987) .

<sup>13</sup>*The Young Rebecca*, ed. Jane Marcus ( London: Methuen, 1982) , p.59.

<sup>14</sup>"Feminism," *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States* ( New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) , p.309.

<sup>15</sup>Michele Barrett and Mary Mcintosh, "Ethnocentrism and Socialist-Feminist Theory," *Feminist Review* 20, p.39.

<sup>16</sup>Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, *Materialist Feminisms*, p.3.

<sup>17</sup>Beavoir de Simone, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley ( New York: Vintage, 1971) , p.139.

<sup>18</sup>M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* ( Bangalore: Prism Books Pvt. Ltd., 1993) , p.235.

<sup>19</sup>"Feminism," *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writings in the United States*, p.310.

<sup>20</sup>*Speaking of Gender*, ed. Elaine Showalter ( New York and London: Routledge, 1989) , p.2.

<sup>21</sup>Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*( London and New York: Methuen, 1987) , p.23.

<sup>22</sup>Toril Moi, "Men Against Patriarchy," *Gender and Theory*, ed. Linda Kauffman, p.182.

<sup>23</sup>Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye*( New York: Doubleday, 1988) , p.353.

<sup>24</sup>*Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship*, ed. Shari Benstock ( Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1987) , p.147.

<sup>25</sup>Ann Curthoys, *For and Against Feminism*( Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988) , pp.20-1.

## 2

### Censorship and Freedom of Mind: Some Reflections

Much has already been written about censorship — its varied implications, forms, nature, and impact on the individual as well as society — by a number of scholars in the critical studies collected and edited by K.K. Sharma under the title *Censorship and Literature* and elsewhere as well, and hence in this essay I shall avoid the repetition of material and arguments on the subject, and shall only examine objectively the basic merits and demerits of both censorship and freedom of mind. I believe that censorship, if exercised judiciously and wisely, is a boon to mankind, just as restrained freedom of expression is of paramount importance for the full growth of the individual and society. In other words, what I feel is that for the truly wholesome, all-round advancement of civilization, both the tyranny of censorship and the licence for limitless liberty of thought must be curbed, and kept under reasonable control and discipline by each other. Thus, the two should not be treated as antagonistic forces, but must be used as complementary and supplementary to each other. In fact, it is only by forging a harmonious tie between the two that the individual and society can be immensely benefitted and enriched. Let me elaborate it.

Censorship is as old as human race, and has been usually regarded as a curse to the full, natural growth of man's mind. Since time immemorial, persons in power have always been ruthlessly imposing restrictions on free, independent thinking in every sphere of life — religious or moral, social, political, literary etc. This accounts for the untold, grossly unjust sufferings of men who are born once in ages, such as Socrates, Jesus Christ, Galileo, Gandhiji and several others. Indeed, censorship has often been the bane of culture and civilization; but the dam of it has never been strong enough to withstand for long the tide of new

ideas and beliefs. True, man's mind and heart, i.e. his thoughts and feelings, are irrepressible; they can be suppressed for a short period of time only.

Human thoughts and activities are usually banned on two grounds — religious or moral and political. Most of the works of art and other kinds, too, are suppressed on the pretext that they are immoral or irreligious and hence pernicious to the welfare of society, or that they are dangerous to the nation because they smack of treason and anti-nationalism. The first plea for censoring art has been the most common one. While in ancient times, censorship was exercised more on religious and political grounds than on moral, in the modern age the situation has changed and immorality has become quite a prominent basis of it. The other common terms for immorality are indecency, pornography, etc. A work of art, even if it is indecent, may be outstanding and fine, to quote the words of Robert Lynd, "by reason of its humanity, its imaginative intensity, or its humour."<sup>1</sup> In case a piece of art is the presentment of life without faith, hope, charity, consideration, compassion, self-control, etc., it may be branded immoral and may be censored.

It is true that the primary aim of art is to create or re-create beauty; it has no right to exist unless it presents something more beautiful than reality. Unfortunately, if the artist loses sight of this fact, he offers us nothing but frightful reality, real or imaginary. Such a work is almost a deliberate denial of the essential beauty permeating the universe. God bestows upon man genius with the sacred trust that he will make use of its magical powers to purify, and not to pollute, the human soul; it is not to be employed to serve as a clue to the recesses of hell, horror and corruption. The common reader looks to art for some revelation of loveliness, wholesomeness and ardour, and not for vulgarity, indecency, depression, shock, etc. The beauty created and communicated by art is largely due to the artist's responsibility emanating from his wonderful sense of natural restraint and "selective conscience."

Undeniably, art is not anarchy and its majesty and might should not be employed as a means of debasement of life. The

artist cannot and should not assume the role of a law-giver; rather, he must bow before the will of the generations of men, and the age-old, time-honoured and well-tested values and ways of life. Moreover, art is a public thing, and not a private matter. Therefore, it should conform to the accepted norms of decency; it has no business to flout or violate them. The censor should act like the sanitary inspector and must notify and bring to book all that is unhygienic and unwholesome in art. True, an indecent artistic production is a greater menace to our public health than any of the epidemic diseases, for it destroys the soul, while the diseases only destroy our body. Genuine art must contribute to man's mental poise and balance, and his self-preservation, and this is possible only when it is free from pornography, indecency and corruption. It should attempt to make life noble and elevating rather than horrible and hideous. And if it fails in this regard, it must perish, for life is much more precious than art, and so the former is to be preserved, no matter even at the cost of the latter. Life should ascend rather than descend, and if art or any other thing drags it down to the low ebb, it must be flung away. Freedom of expression in any form, including artistic one, cannot and must not be allowed as a pretext for licence. Unbridled licence kills the genuine spirit of freedom. Thus, men of genius, who discard the age-old sanctities of life, render irreparable harm to art.

It cannot be refuted that men have the basic instinct to moralize their actions and to see the society comply with certain well-acknowledged ethical concepts. Plato's casting of the poets out of the Republic illustrates the fact that the ethical side of man has always been generally so dominant that it has never tolerated the defiance of the framework of moral rules and social conventions. No wonder, then, if both the Government and the general public have often been easily upset by the activities of the artists, who are very original and innovating. Naturally, the state and society could not bear Byron and Shelley's revolutionary ideas, Ibsen's anti-bourgeois conception of marriage, Tolstoy's threatening unconventional interpretation of Christian ethics, Flaubert's so-called "immoral" representation of life, Hardy's unconventional

view of love, sex and marriage, and D.H. Lawrence's explicit and elaborate portrayal of sex-life and the depths of the world of seething passions.

Indeed, there will be scarcely any need of censorship if the artist does not fail to realise the old basic truth that man is a moral being with a conscience and with responsibility to himself and to others. To be unaware of this great reality means the impious denial of life, the rejection of the moral essence of life — i.e. the very core of human existence. Sometimes, an artist produces a lurid work, not intentionally but out of sheer artistic impulses which have decadent tendencies. Frankness and freedom in art are not to be opposed vehemently, and it is wrong to believe that art should be confined to school or home. If an artistic creation is not absolutely suitable for general public because it touches certain aspects of sex, it does not mean that it is not a genuine work of art. For example, novels like Mrs. Gaskell's *Ruth*, George Elliot's *Adam Bede* and Thomas Hardy's *Tess*, notwithstanding their treatment of sex, have always occupied a distinguished place among the masterpieces of world literature. But this should not lead us to assert that even inartistic intrusion of indecent matter in a book does not deserve excision or expurgation.

We have to admit that it is very difficult to moralize the beauty of passion and the fire of senses. Obviously, the moralists cannot put up with the works centred upon them, and condemn them by asserting that they are without high ideals, and that they are not first-rate works of art because of aesthetic representation of such baser sensations which exert deleterious influence on the reader. But such a strong, one-sided so-called moral attitude towards art is pernicious and abhorrent because it does a great disservice to both art and morals by paralysing the artist's sacred sense of duty of deepening our consciousness and widening our recognitions. If the moralists, with their narrow view, had had their way in all the ages and succeeded in their special missions, there would have been left very few great works of art or aesthetic classics. We cannot forget how the moralists condemned and charged with immoral tendencies the immortal artists, "the

pilgrims of eternity" like Euripides, Aristophanes, Rebelais, Moliere, Voltaire, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Fielding, Byron, Shelley, Keates, Flaubert, Maupassant, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Whitman, Tolstoy, Hardy, Lawrence, James Joyce and many others. Luckily, their charges could not be sustained by the public for a long time because their conception of "the good" was found too narrow to be considered true. Under the impact of such an unwholesome moral outlook, artistic representations of life would invariably appear either over-idealized or over-moralized and in opposition to the higher and more spiritual instincts of mankind. As a matter of fact, a work, howsoever indecent and morally unconventional it may appear to be, should be judged in consonance with the relation and the equilibrium between the morality of nature and the morality of man. Even a work, dealing with sexuality like that of D.H. Lawrence, can be of high artistic standard if it succeeds in exploring and establishing the relation between the morality of nature, as expressed in the sexual activity, and worldly conduct. For everything which we call spiritual is born of physical needs and reactions, the most patent expression of which is the sexual act which is the only means of creating or preserving life on this planet and also, according to many thinkers both in the West and the East, a means and a symbol of spiritual consummation.

I am not in favour of strict, blind censorship. Most of the men must agree that there is a point at which the police must interfere; we can imagine all kinds of things, but everything is not to be written down and exposed for sale. But all those, who are opposed to censorship, must feel happy to note that in most of the countries of the world it is really very seldom that the police act against pornography in art, and even if they act, they do not act very thoroughly and persistently. Moreover, even the most pornographic works are not banned for ever. For instance, once Zola was prohibited from the reach of the reader, but now we can buy him anywhere. Then, Balzac and *Contes Drolatiques*, in spite of horrible bench, had not disappeared from the book-stalls for long. If the task of artistic prosecution is taken seriously, we shall get scores of works condemned every year in every country.

The fact that there are not definite, fixed laws to assess the indecency of a piece of art is really very appalling. Inevitably, many works escape censorship, while some, which are less objectionable on moral, religious, political or social ground, are vigorously and downright censored. This can be illustrated from varied cases of censorship in the past. When D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* was brought before the court of law in November 1915 with the charge that it was a mass of obscenity of thought and action throughout, Clement Shorter observed that Zola's novels were child's food in comparison with "the strong meat" that *The Rainbow* was. Mr. Shorter would not have made this assertion, if he had read Zola's *La Terre* which was much more obscene and lurid than Lawrence's masterpiece. By referring to Zola, he, like so many other people who disliked censorship, was, as a matter of fact, tried to go miles out of his way to assist censors. What I want to point out is that if a book is to be sentenced to death and all its copies are to be destroyed as per the court order, one must not ignore the truth that there are always scores of books that demand prior scrutiny and that all these works must also be judged by the same criterion that is applied to a censored book.

What shocks a genuine lover of art is that whenever a great artist is prosecuted, most of the brother artists and the intelligentsia keep silent and very few of them venture to defend, or take up the cudgels for, him. They tolerate the persecution and do not make a collective protest against it, and thus prove themselves more fickle and cowardly than the common man. This had happened when Hardy and Lawrence were condemned as anti-social and immoral for producing their masterpieces, and the same happened recently when Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and Taslima Nasrin's *Shame* were banned and condemned. But for Arnold Bennett, nobody had come out to defend D.H. Lawrence for writing *The Rainbow* which does not shock the moral awareness of the people, let alone *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

The suppression of a work of art is inescapably accompanied with a number of evils. First, the moment a work is banned, the smugglers, pirates and expurgators get to work and become

the strange and uninvited allies of those who take upon themselves the holy responsibility of preventing "the corruption of public morals" — it is impossible to understand the connotation of this expression, though it has been commonly used ever since Socrates was murdered on the pretext of corrupting the morals of the youths of Athens. And this evil, bigger than that of simple censorship, is bound to continue so long as the law is in the hands of a generation too old and rigid to comprehend the changes in morality, custom, speech, thought, etc., occurring with the passage of time. And it is fact that the modes of morality and traditions change with the changes in society; what was highly immoral and socially objectionable in the Victorian age was not so after the First World War. Indeed, the cultural and social changes with the passage of time invariably give birth to new moral and social norms. Secondly, the evil of suppression accelerates and intensifies the viciousness of the press which tries to survive only by exploiting news, and hence to clamour for the suppression of a work is more profitable for the press than merely reviewing it impartially or ignoring it completely. Apparently, unless the press develops a moral sense, justice cannot be accorded to a work and the ban on it cannot be easily withdrawn. Lastly, a very lamentable aspect of a serious work censored for pornography is that some very significant parts of it are expurgated, and thus the very soul of it is crushed and it is rendered very ordinary. The most glaring example of this baneful influence of censorship on a great work is *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. The cuts made in the book reduced it to just mediocrity, damaging its intrinsic artistic beauty and worth. Condemning the expurgation of the novel, V.S. Pritchett, a celebrated novelist and critic of the present century, rightly observed:

This expurgated edition is the final crime against him .... It was not mentioned that Lawrence's trustees for some reason felt justified in making cuts in the book which he himself refused to make during his lifetime. The result is that what was in the original not very good Lawrence has been deprived of half of its point and much of its poetry .... It is not *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as Lawrence wrote it and it would have been better to have left it unpublished until such time as our guardians recover their sense of proportion. There is a good case to

be made, in view of our national temperament, for the suppression of the obvious pornography which is displayed in our chemists' shops; but there is no case for the suppression of serious works and works of art.<sup>2</sup>

However, I feel that absolute freedom of mind is as injurious to social order as strict censorship, and therefore both, though necessary, must not be used without restraint. In certain cases censorship is essential to curb undesirable and harmful mode of thinking and expression. Even the inimitable, great Shakespeare is not free from the element of pornography which needs to be weeded out. For instance, the following directly sexy, light remarks towards the close of *The Merchant of Venice* cannot be accepted as artistically and functionally interwoven with the texture of the play:

- Por. ....  
By heaven, I will ne'er come in your bed  
Until I see the ring.  
or  
Por. Let not that doctor e'er come near my house;  
Since he hath got the jewel that I loved,  
.....  
I'll not deny him anything I have,  
No, not my body, nor my husband's bed.  
.....  
Lie not a night from home; watch me like Argus;  
If you do not, If I be left alone,  
Now, by mine honour which is yet mine own,  
I'll have that doctor for mine bedfellow.  
or  
Gra. Well, do you so, let not me take him then;  
For, if I do, I'll mar the young clerk's pen.  
or  
Bass. Sweet Doctor, you shall be my bed-fellow;  
When I am absent, then lie with my wife.<sup>3</sup>

Again, Hardy's vehement denunciation of God in the last paragraph of the novel, *Tess*, — “ ‘Justice’ was done, and the President of the immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess”<sup>4</sup> — does not seem to be the artistic need of the narrative; the statement is very strong and leads the reader to depression, nothingness and loss of faith in goodness and divine justice. More objectionable than this are some of the situations

and scenes in *Jude the Obscure*; for example, Jude and Sue's living together for years without marriage and having children out of this relationship can but damage the very foundation of the social structure of any country. Obviously, the social and religious condemnation of Hardy's last two novels was not wholly unfair, and he was, to a great extent, justly compelled to lay down his magic wand of fiction. Likewise, if Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was vehemently and outright censored, there was some justification in it. The writer's repeated use of the words like “fuck,” “penis,” etc. is not the artistic necessity of the tale, and the same is true of some detailed, unrestrained descriptions of the sexual intercourses between Connie and Mellors. The closing sentence of Mellors' letter to Lady Chatterley with which the novel ends is undoubtedly indecent, cheap and obscene — penis and vagina are addressed as John Thomas and Lady Jane: “ ‘ .... John Thomas says good night to Lady Jane, a little droopingly, but with a hopeful heart.’ ”<sup>5</sup>

To conclude, much can be said in favour of and against both censorship and freedom of mind. Therefore, what I believe is that sensible and intelligent use of censorship and freedom of expression is necessary for the well-being of a cultured, civilized society and art. The slightest imbalance on either side will only cause irreparable damage to the individual as well as the society on the whole; the two must serve as the two healthy legs of equal strength for the onward march and all-round progress of meaningful human life on this planet.

## References

- <sup>1</sup>Robert Lynd, *Daily News* ( 5 October 1915 ) , p.6.  
<sup>2</sup>“V.S. Pritchett in *Fortnightly Review*,” *D.H. Lawrence: The Critical Heritage*, ed. R.P. Draper ( London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970 ) , p.288.  
<sup>3</sup>*Complete Works of Shakespeare* ( New Delhi: Oxford & IBH Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd., 1980 ) , pp.251-52.  
<sup>4</sup>Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* ( London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1963 ) , p.446.  
<sup>5</sup>D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* ( Delhi: All India Publishers & Distributors, 1993 ) , p.328.

## 3

## Poetry as “The Mantra of the Real”: A Note on Sri Aurobindo's Poetics

## I

Sri Aurobindo's unique genius is fundamentally original, perhaps more original than that of any other Western or Eastern creative writer or thinker of the present century. A very outstanding seer and a great creative writer evenly balanced in him, he, soaked in great literatures, arts and thoughts, both Western and Asian, old and new, is also one of the most distinguished theorists and practitioners of literature, giving new dimensions and directions to poetics with a view to making it suitable for the future men of letters. Essentially a seer, a Rishi in the old Vedic tradition, haunted by visions, he has enriched the human mind with his captivating and compelling vision of aesthetics, which by its virtue of being cosmic and profound is much ahead of his times, and hence will influence the future authors, though it might not have exerted much impact on his contemporaries and immediate successors.

Though a seer and a poet throughout his life, he began as a creative writer and remained so very actively till the end of his life. In fact, his dedication to Yoga did not interrupt, or interfere with, his literary activities which went on ceaselessly till he breathed his last. In this respect, his poetics is primarily founded on his deeply felt intuitive experiences. His view of art and poetry is embodied in the book, *The Future Poetry*, in his letters, and in the various works he has bequeathed to us. In short, Sri Aurobindo's poetics is the natural corollary of his strikingly original creative mind plus variegated influences that his receptive mind felt from time to time in India as well as abroad. Thus on his aesthetic vision can be perceived the impact of Homer, Aristophanes, Dante, Goethe, French poets, Shakespeare, the

*Upnishadas*, the *Gita*, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, Kalidasa, Bhavbhuti, Rabindranath Tagore, Ramkrishna Paramhansa, Vivekanand, the Indian aesthetic tradition, the Greco-Latin and French traditions, and, above all, the Indian spiritual tradition and his own spiritual and intellectual experiences.

In the present paper of modest length, an attempt has been made to explain and examine only some of the basic aspects of Sri Aurobindo's poetics, enunciated comprehensively by him in *The Future Poetry*, letters and other expository writings. In fact, a full-length study is needed to do full justice to the subject. Besides, to discuss every aspect of it in a paper such as this will mean a lot of repetition of what has already been written on the subject by scholars like V.K. Gokak, K.R.S. Iyengar, Sisirkumar Ghose, Rameshwer Gupta, K.D. Sethna, S.K. Prasad, Prema Nandkumar, H.R. Justa, Som P. Ranchan and others.

## II

Sri Aurobindo opines that any attempt to define poetry scientifically is a sheer wastage of energy as it is almost impossible to define it because it is something elusive and unfathomable:

Not that we need spend a vain effort in labouring to define anything so profound, elusive and indefinable as the breath of poetic creation; to take the myriad-stringed harp of Saraswati to pieces for the purpose of scientific analysis must always be a narrow and rather barren amusement.<sup>1</sup>

Obviously, he does not endorse the definition of poetry as given by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Arnold or T.S. Eliot. Nevertheless, he assigns poetry a very high position, and calls it “the Mantra of the Real.”<sup>2</sup> What he means by it is that poetry must transcend the earth to encompass higher spiritual regions inhabited by Divine Truth, Divine Beauty and Divine Delight. He uses the Sanskrit word “Mantra” because he believes that there is no word in English which can be its equivalent, as it connotes both incantation and magic. The concept of poetry as “the Mantra of the Real” is based on what the Vedic poets have stated in this connection. Speaking of it, Sri Aurobindo observes:

What the Vedic poets meant by the Mantra was an inspired and revealed seeing and visioned thinking, attended by a realisation, to use the ponderous but necessary modern word, of some inmost truth of God and self and man and Nature and cosmos and life and thing and thought and experience and deed.<sup>3</sup>

The Mantra of the Real, according to Sri Aurobindo, is the very essence, or the true nature, of poetry. Mantra, in his view, is the product of 'overmind,' and not of human mind or imagination, howsoever brilliant and powerful it may be. The creator of the Mantra is able to reach and reveal the very soul of things, their innermost reality. Thus poetry is the power of employing words to enchant the reader, that is, to overflow the human mind with vitality, awareness of things and their true relationships with one another, and not with simple delight. Inevitably, poetry as the Mantra of the Real is the Real is the revelation of the innermost truth and rhythm. In his *magnum opus*, *Savitri*, he poetically expresses his view in the following words:

As when the mantra sinks in Yogi's ear,  
Its message enters stirring the blind brain  
And keeps in the dim ignorant cells its sound;  
The hearer understands a form of words  
And, musing on the index thought it holds,  
His strives to read it with the labouring mind,  
But finds bright hints, not the embodied truth:  
Then falling silent in himself to know  
He meets the deeper listening of his soul:  
The Word repeats itself in rhythmic strains:  
Thought, vision, feeling, sense, the body's self  
Are seized unalterably and endures  
An ecstasy and an immortal change;  
He feels a Wideness and becomes a Power,  
All knowledge rushes on him like a sea:  
Transmuted by the white spiritual ray  
He walks in naked heavens of joy and calm,  
Sees the God-face and hears transcendent speech:<sup>4</sup>

### III

Sri Aurobindo gives a very serious consideration to the poetic inspiration, i.e. the originating sources of poetry. He talks of the

numerous sources of poetry, such as the superconscient source, word-vision, conscious vision and imagery, the state of *Svapna Samadhi*, and any plane of consciousness of the poetic personality, simple dreams, etc. He writes in this connection:

Poetry does come from these sources or even from the superconscient sometimes; but does not come usually through the form of dreams; it comes either through word-vision or through conscious vision and imagery whether in a fully waking or an inward-drawn state: the latter may go so far as to be a state of Samadhi—*svapna samadhi*.... No poetry can be written without access to some source of inspiration. Mere recording of dreams or images or even visions could never be sufficient, unless it is a poetic inspiration that records them with the right use of words and rhythm bringing out their poetic substance.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, the source of poetic inspiration, in Sri Aurobindo's view, may be anywhere: the physical plane, the higher and lower vital, the plane of dynamic vision, the dynamic intelligence, the psychic and illumined mind, the overmind, etc.

Though Sri Aurobindo does not discard any of the originating sources of poetry,<sup>6</sup> yet he considers our superconscient source above ordinary mental states as the most patent and potent form of poetic inspiration for composing great poetry. Explaining the term "poetic inspiration" and the most significant form of it, he asserts:

What we mean by inspiration is that the impetus of poetic creation and the utterance comes to us from our superconscient sources above the ordinary mentality so that what is written seems not to be fabrication of the brain mind, but something more sovereign breathed or poured from above.<sup>7</sup>

Sri Aurobindo opines that the superconscient or overhead regions are four: the higher mind, the illumined mind, the intuitive mind and the overmind.

This brings us close to Sri Aurobindo's unflinching belief that the poetic inspiration is Divine. That is to say, the poet receives an irresistible inspiration to write poetry from above, from the Everlasting. Like Shelley, he thinks that poetry is a Divine, mysterious act of creation, beyond and above the comprehension and consciousness of man. The Eternal works through the poet, and great poetry thus composed is not entirely the creation of the poet's mind. He exemplifies this from his own poetic activities in

these words:

.... I receive from above my head and receive changes and corrections from above without any initiation by myself or labour of the brain. Even if I change a hundred times, the mind does not work at that, it only receives.<sup>8</sup>

Being a Yogi, Sri Aurobindo considers poetry as the creation of mainly "*Svapna Samadhi*," or the trans-state of mind. The creative artist is not merely imaginative or mental; rather, he is more concerned with the soul, his inner psychic being in relation to the hidden and concealed realities. The modern common reader regards poetry as man's indulgence in imagination and intellect, while in the olden times a poet was essentially a seer, possessed with vision of truths which he would reveal to people. To quote Sri Aurobindo's own words:

To us poetry is a revel of intellect and fancy, imagination, a plaything and caterer for our amusement, our entertainer, the nautch girl of the mind. But to the men of old the poet was a seer, a revealer of hidden truths, imagination no dancing courtesan, but a priestess in God's house commissioned not to spin fictions but to image hidden and difficult truths: even the metaphor and simile in the Vedic style are used with a serious purpose and expected to convey a reality, not suggest a pleasing artifice of thought. The image was to these seers a relative symbol of the unrevealed and it was used because it would hint luminously to the mind what the precise intellectual word, apt only for logical or practical thought or to express the physical and the superficial, cannot at all hope to manifest.<sup>9</sup>

Inevitably, the poet is essentially a spiritual being who, during his poetic activity, transcends the barriers of the physical or the mental world. Naturally, this kind of poetry of soul can be apprehended and enjoyed only through soul. That is, the reader of the poetry of this kind will have to be spiritually awakened and transformed, and his critical sensibility is to be 'truly spiritualised.' Here, it is to be mentioned that Sri Aurobindo uses the word "soul" in a very wide sense, meaning by it "Jivataman," "the psychic being," "the spark of soul," etc. A poet of soul is the creator of spiritual joy, "Ananda", and not mere sensuous, intellectual or imaginative delight.

True to his belief and theory, Sri Aurobindo as a poet gets poetic inspiration mainly from above his head. He would make himself receptive and would submit himself completely to the

Divine Power. This does not mean that poetry is merely a creation of the Divine Power, and that man makes no contribution to it. As a matter of fact, poetry is the result of the perfect collaboration between the divine powers and the human activity. The vital mind passively receives and records what is given to it by the divine powers. If the vital mind and emotions work actively and initiate the poetic composition, the result is the creation of inferior kind of poetry. Hence Sri Aurobindo's stress on the poet's reception of the unhampered inspiration for the composition of great poetry:

There would be no difficulty if the inspiration came through without obstruction or interference in a pure transcript — that is what happens in a poet's highest or freest moments when he writes not at all out of his own external human mind but by inspiration, as the mouthpiece of the Gods.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, Sri Aurobindo holds that the poet not only receives the raw material of poetry straight from the Everlasting, but also gets a kind of dictates, *adesh*, from Him to give it a proper poetic shape and to revise and rewrite it so as to make it a true poetic work. Patently, even the craftsmanship or conscientiousness required of a poet is nothing but an aspect of the poetic inspiration, a kind of divine suggestion given by the Infinite, which a true poet must accept and act upon it accordingly. About this Sri Aurobindo avers:

As for *Adesh*, people speak of *Adesh* without making the necessary distinctions, but these distinctions have to be made. The Divine speaks to us in many ways and it is not always imperative *Adesh* that comes. When it does, it is clear and irresistible, the mind has to obey and there is no question possible, even if what comes is contrary to the preconceived ideas of the mental intelligence. But more often what is said is an intimation or even less, as mere indication, which the mind may not follow because it is not impressed with its imperative necessity. It is something offered but not imposed, perhaps something not even offered but only suggested from the Truth above.<sup>11</sup>

It is a well-known fact that Sri Aurobindo worked very hard on his poetical masterpiece, *Savitri*, for decades. He wrote and revised it several times. But even in acts of deliberate craftsmanship, he mostly depended on inspiration, and not on the mere hard-working of his brain. He admits that all the alterations and

improvements made in the first draft of the poem were in consonance with the suggestions he received from the Truth above. Commenting on his revisions of his masterpiece, *Savitri*, he remarks:

No, I do not work at the poem once a week; I have other things to do. Once a month perhaps, I look at the new form of the first book and make such changes as inspiration points out to me — so that nothing shall fall below the minimum height which I have fixed for it.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, Sri Aurobindo's conscious poetic efforts were less important than the poetic inspiration; in fact, the former only worked in accordance with the latter. An extract from the epic, *Savitri*, is quoted below to illustrate the point further, since it clearly expresses his specific belief in the utmost value of divine inspiration for the initiation and accomplishment of the poetic work:

Oft inspiration with her lightning feet,  
 A sudden messenger from the all-seeing tops,  
 Traversed the soundless corridors of his mind  
 Bringing her rhythmic sense of hidden things.  
 A music spoke transcending mortal speech.  
 As if from a golden phial of the All-Bliss,  
 A joy of light, a joy of sudden sight,  
 A rapture of the thrilled undying Word  
 Poured into his heart as into an empty cup,  
 Creating in a young and virgin Time.  
 In a brief moment caught, a little space,  
 All-knowledge packed into great wordless thoughts  
 Lodged in the expectant stillness of his depths  
 A crystal of ultimate Absolute,  
 A portion of the inexpressible Truth  
 Revealed by silence to the silent soul.  
 The intense creatrix in his stillness wrought  
 Her power fallen speechless grew more intimate;  
 She looked upon the seen and the unforeseen,  
 Unguessed domains she made her native field  
 All-vision gathered into a single ray,  
 As when the eyes stare at an invisible point  
 Till through the intensity of one luminous spot  
 An apocalypse of a world of images  
 Enters into the kingdom of the seer.<sup>13</sup>

#### IV

Poetry, according to Sri Aurobindo, aims at achieving the harmony of five perennial powers — Truth, Beauty, Joy, Life and Spirit — labelled by him as the suns of poetry. He repeatedly emphasizes that the Mantra was the highest creation of the Vedic and Upanishadic poets. Furthermore, he points out that the Mantra was the primary concern not only of the ancient Indian poets, but will also be of the modern and the future poets, despite the drastic changes that have taken place in the modern age of intellect and reason marked by new science and technology, new philosophy and religion. The reason is that notwithstanding the tremendous progress in the domain of science and psychology, the modern mind has not shaken off the innate belief in the imperceptible self and spirit.

Sri Aurobindo accentuates the truth that a change in the outlook of man invariably leads to a change in poetry. He hopes that in future man will drift fast towards spiritualism, though it does not imply that all future poets will be seers and all poetry will be essentially spiritual. He believes that a change of this kind will give birth to poet-seers who will be mainly preoccupied with “that universal beauty which is seen by the inner eye, heard by the inner ear.”<sup>14</sup> While philosophy indulges in abstractions and religion emphasizes asceticism and otherworldliness, poetry unites the concrete and the abstract, the life and the spirit. The truth with which poetry is concerned is absolutely different from the truth of philosophy or of science or of religion. As a matter of fact, poetry deals with the truth which is self-expression of the eternal truth “so distinct that it appears to give quite another face of things and reveal quite another side of experience.”<sup>15</sup>

However, the poet may be wedded to a system of philosophy or religious creed. No wonder in ancient times poetry and philosophy were almost inalienable. Thus the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* are, in essence, philosophical poetry. This leads Sri Aurobindo to infer that the primary concern of poetry is not to

depict the essence of baser realities of life, but to transcend the physical, baser world so as to attain the higher, spiritual one. About the poet-seer writing this kind of poetry, he states:

The poet-seer sees differently, thinks in another way, voices himself in quite another manner than the philosopher or the prophet. The prophet announces the Truth as the word of God or his command, he is the giver of the message; the poet shows us Truth in its power of beauty, in its symbol or image, or reveals it to us in the workings of Nature or in the workings of life, and when he has done that, his whole work is done; he need not be its explicit spokesman. The philosopher's business is to discriminate Truth and put its parts and aspects into intellectual relation with each other; the poet's is to seize and embody aspects of Truth in their living relations, or rather — for that is too philosophical a language — to see her features and excited by the vision create in the beauty of her image.<sup>16</sup>

Inevitably, the truth with which poetry is concerned is something very sublime, profound and vast. Even the sordid realities of life are transformed into great truths by a seer-poet.

Poetry, in Sri Aurobindo's opinion, synthesises, and lives in the harmonious relationship of vision of truth, passion for beauty and quest for joy — the first is the enlightening power of the poet's activity, while the other two are its moving power. But the power that sustains the poetic creation and makes it vital and great is the breath of life. Naturally, Sri Aurobindo attaches utmost importance to life in poetry. To quote his own words:

A poetry which is all thought and no life or a thought which does not constantly keep in touch with and refresh itself from the fountains of life, even if it is something more than a strong, elegant or cultured philosophising or moralising in skilled verse, even if it has vision and intellectual beauty, suffers always by lack of fire and body, wants perfection of grasp and does not take full hold on the inner being to seize and uplift as well as sweeten and illumine, as poetry should do and all great poetic writing does. The function of the poet even when he is most absorbed in thinking is still to bring out not merely the truth and interest, but the beauty and power of the thought, its life and emotion, and not only to do that, not only to make the thought a beautiful and living thing, but to make it one thing with life.<sup>17</sup>

Sri Aurobindo imparts to the word "life" a special meaning. It does not stand for the physical life only, the life of feelings and passions; it connotes the inner life which is infinite, and it is this which is the real strength of poetry. Poetry, in his view, should

not be confined merely to the sensuous, intellectual and imaginative aspects of life; on the contrary, it must pulsate with inner, spiritual life because only then it becomes the rhythmic voice of life. The poet is gifted with the power to see and comprehend the innermost, unfathomable depths of life, and hence his voice — poetry — is the revelation of our total finite life as well as the greater infinite life. In fact, this kind of poetry, in Sri Aurobindo's words, "will be the voice and rhythmic utterance of our greater, our infinite existence, and will give us the strong and infinite sense, the spiritual and vital joy, the exalting power of a greater breath of life."<sup>18</sup>

Sri Aurobindo has thought very seriously and minutely about truth, beauty and joy in poetry. So far as truth is concerned, the poet must deal with the realities of life, both the external and the internal, the sensuous and the spiritual, the finite and the infinite. About beauty and joy, his observations are, again, unique, marked by remarkable originality. He holds that beauty and joy are separated in our crude vital and mental experience; and that the two are only the two sides of the Ideal. It is only for the convenience of the reader that he has discussed these two as two different entities. Usually, the poet describes beauty in physical form, appealing to the physical senses and gratifying the physical desires. But the poet is also concerned with the beauty of ideas, resulting in spiritual beauty which is the incarnation of the Divine. About this Sri Aurobindo asserts: "Beauty is the special divine Manifestation in the physical as Truth is in the mind, Love in the heart, Power in the vital. Supernatural beauty is the highest divine beauty manifesting in Matter."<sup>19</sup>

Sri Aurobindo believes that love and beauty are the source of joy, *Ananda*, as light and knowledge are of consciousness. God can be found only in the highest joy, and this is the reason why the spiritual joy makes life beautiful, wonderful and resplendent to man. Small wonder poetry, which is inspired and governed by spirituality, can exert a healthy impact on the life of the reader. Spiritual joy or *Ananda* is the highest form of human vision. *Ananda* — fathomless, indivisible joy — has love and beauty as its two

most important ingredients. The highest delight, the spiritual joy, which makes life lovable and beautiful, is attainable only through the realisation of, and close contact with, God. Poetry, in Sri Aurobindo's opinion, should aim at embodying this spiritual delight, for only then it will exercise a wholesome influence over the life of man. The poet discovers within himself, or in the world around him, a profoundly spiritual vision which clothes everything in celestial joy— *Ananda*. The reason of this is not far to seek. The Vedic religion, according to which spirit is the foremost and ultimate reality, explains it convincingly. *Brahma* is omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent, and is the ultimate reality. Life emanates from *Brahma*, or the Spirit, and ultimately merges into it. Thus man is only an ingredient of *Brahma*, God, or the Spirit. Naturally, the spirit in him drives him towards Him. This accounts for Sri Aurobindo's preoccupation with the poetry of Spirit, about which he affirms:

This can only come if the mind of the race takes actually the step over which it is now hesitating and passes from the satisfaction of the liberated intellect which has been its preoccupation for the last two centuries to the pursuit of the realisation of the larger self, from the scrutiny of the things that explain to the experience of the things that reveal, the truths of the spirit.<sup>20</sup>

## V

A very basic feature of Sri Aurobindo's poetics is the fusion of the spirit and the material world. To him, the transcendent and the aesthetic are absolutely inseparable from each other. The Matter and the Spirit are wedded to each other; the body and the soul are one, having no independent entities of their own. No doubt, art in all its forms is fundamentally concerned with the perception of beauty; but it also invariably embodies ideals beyond the mere grasp of beauty. Thus great poetry, according to Sri Aurobindo, is the Energy of the Transcendent; it is "the rhythmic voice of life...one of the inner and not one of the surface voices."<sup>21</sup> True, it presents inner beauty, an assessment of inner life. Obviously, the poet is not different from the spiritualist, though the two seem to be two entirely different beings. The spirit and

the material world become one unified whole in great poetry, despite the fact that to an artist the world is real, while to the spiritualist the spirit is real and the world is illusion. Apparently, to Sri Aurobindo, the transcendent and the aesthetic are inalienable. No wonder he asserts that art is spiritual, having its basis in sensuous reality. What he professes, he has realised in his own life as is evident from his record of one of his unique epiphanies, moments of spiritual revelations:

Since I set foot on the Indian soil on the Apollo Bunder in Bombay, I began to have spiritual experiences, but these were not divorced from this world but had an inner and infinite bearing on it, such as a feeling of the infinite pervading material space and the Immanent inhabiting material objects and bodies. At the same time I found myself entering supra-physical world and planes with influences and an effect from them upon the material plane.<sup>22</sup>

Patently, Sri Aurobindo's approach is strikingly different from Surrealism, Dadaism and Symbolism which do not attach due significance to the reality of the material world.

Sri Aurobindo holds that to gain strength in poetic art, as in any other sphere of work, power of *Shakti* is needed. Just as in Hindu philosophy, *Shakti* is inalienable from Shiva, likewise force is inseparable from being. The artist, who needs power continually, can acquire it through profound *Sadhana*, dedication. Thus he believes in the Indian concepts as stressed by some of the modern Indian English authors like Tagore and Raja Rao. Sri Aurobindo not only talked of *Sadhana*, but also practised it in his life. His intense *Yoga*, *Sadhana* infused him with immense power enabling him to attain supra-mental consciousness in his life on the earth. Through *Sadhana*, he grasped his true self, and combined the various parts of his self to see the Divine in others. According to him, in *Yoga* work is as invaluable as *Bhakti* or meditation, for work done with utmost sincerity and spirit of renunciation transports man's consciousness close to the Divine. This is why, his concept of *Purna Yoga* is the unification of knowledge, work, devotion and meditation, stemming from man's deep urge for the Divine.

To the common man who is not able to grasp poetry, it is "nothing more than aesthetic pleasure of the imagination, the

intellect and the ear, a sort of elevated pastime."<sup>23</sup> It is true that everyone expects pleasure from poetry, but the delight that poetry affords us cannot be comprehended through intelligence, imagination or senses because they are only its instruments; the poetic delight is the creation of the soul, and hence it can be understood only through the soul. Apropos of this Sri Aurobindo states:

Therefore poetry has not really done its work, at least its highest work, until it has raised the pleasure of the instrument and transmuted it into the deeper delight of the soul. A divine Ananda, a delight interpretative, creative, revealing, formative, — one might almost say, and inverse reflection of the joy which the universal soul has felt in its great release of energy when it rang out into the rhythmic forms of the universe the spiritual truth, the large interpretative idea, the life, the power, the emotion of things packed into its original creative vision — such spiritual joy is that which the soul of the poet feels and which, when he can conquer the human difficulties of his task, he succeeds in pouring also into all those who are prepared to receive it. And this delight is not merely a godlike pastime; it is a great formative and eliminative power.<sup>24</sup>

Obviously, Sri Aurobindo is of the view that despite faulty poetic technique, a gifted soul is capable of creating great poetry which may captivate human mind for centuries. Technique, according to him, is not as invaluable for poetry as for any other art. The reasons are two: first, the instrument of poetry — the rhythmic word — is more full of immaterial and subtle elements than that of any other art-form; secondly, the instrument of poetry, being the most suggestive, supple and complex of all the instruments of art-forms, has immense possibilities in various directions. The rhythmic word, with its sense and sound, has a soul value, a spiritual power which is absolutely inalienable from it and which is something beyond the mere mechanical construction. This is the reason why the poet, of all artists, is least concerned with the technique of his art. In fact, at the height of creation, he forgets all but the technical side of the poetic creations, and his sound-movement and style emanate naturally from his soul. Therefore, he considers poetry as the highest human speech-form. Accordingly, Sri Aurobindo infers:

So poetry arrives at the indication of infinite meanings beyond the finite intellectual meanings the world carries. It expresses not only the life-soul of man as did the primitive word, not only the ideas of his intelligence for which speech now

usually serves, but the experience, the vision, the ideas, as we may say, of the higher and wider soul in him. Making them real to our life-soul as well as present to our intellect, it opens to us by the word the doors of the Spirit.<sup>25</sup>

## VI

The foregoing discussion of some of the basic aspects of Sri Aurobindo's poetics leads us to draw a few inferences. In the first place, he has thought about poetry more seriously and deeply than any other modern thinker. Even the great mystic poets of the world of both the West and the East, such as Blake, Wordsworth, Yeats, Whitman, Emerson, Kabir, Tagore, Jai Shankar Prasad, Mahadevi Verma and others, could not grasp the unfathomable mystic depth of poetry, and could not reach the superconscious sources of poetry. His concept of the superconscious is strikingly original and profound. Secondly, he reveals a new facet of the poetic imagination, that is, the psychic inspiration. He points out that the psyche illumines and fires the deeper heart, which, in its turn, imparts light to the mind, the vital and the physical body. This makes the mind see the true vision intuitively and distinguish it from the wrong, thus leading man to have the right impulse and intuitive feelings. The psyche rarely leaves its imprint on the poetic composition; it simply enables the poet to have spiritual realisation. The poetry of the higher kind issues from the fusion of the psychic powers and the powers of the illumined mind. This interpretation of the poetic process is highly psychological and intellectual, besides being spiritual. Thirdly, he rightly stresses the marriage between philosophy and aesthetics, material and spiritual, spirit and life, for the creation of great poetry.

Notwithstanding these and many more conspicuous merits, Sri Aurobindo's theory of poetry suffers from some glaring weakness. In the first place, he has made poetry very difficult and complex, thus making it lose much of its natural simplicity and charm which mark even the highest spiritual poetry of the ancient times — the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the psalms, etc. Secondly,

he has delimited the scope of poetry and much of its abiding appeal to the common man by making it highly spiritual and intellectual. Thirdly, his theory of poetry is based on the old Indian tradition of spiritual poetry — poetry as “the Mantra of a the Real” —, and there is not much newness in it, except this that it is a fresh and very profound interpretation of the existing basic facts. Lastly, it is difficult to agree with him that all future poetry will be essentially spiritual and the product of the superconscient, the higher state of mind.

To conclude, Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of poetry focuses on the perception and delineation of the supreme beauty and truth of the Infinite in all its shapes and forms. This kind of vision of poetry emanates from the sublimity of his deeply haunting mystical experiences. His theory of poetry is characterised by a remarkably broad outlook, sound judgement and profound grasp of the subject. It certainly opens up new horizons in the domain of poetry-criticism, for it has as its bedrock his philosophy and spiritual insight, particularly his concept of Sadhana and his view of the seven levels of consciousness — physical, vital, mental ( lower and higher) , illumined mental, intuitive mental, overmind and supermind. He points to the new progressive direction which modern poetic art should take so as to enable man to have, to quote his own words, “the bright moons of the future.” Let us hope that what C.R. Das has remarked about him in general may come true of his poetics also: “Long after he is dead and gone, its words will be echoed and re-echoed, not only in India, but across distant seas and lands.”<sup>26</sup>

## Notes and References

<sup>1</sup>Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry and Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art* ( Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972) , p.9.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.199.

<sup>4</sup>Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, Book Four, Canto Three ( Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1973) , p.375.

<sup>5</sup>*The Future Poetry and Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art*, pp.448-49.

<sup>6</sup>Speaking of other sources of poetic inspiration, besides the Divine one, Sri Aurobindo affirms that poetry “may come through from some plane and the poet excited to creation may build around them constructing his material or getting it from any source he can tap. There are many possibilities of this nature. There is also the possibility of an inspiration not from above, but from somewhere within on the ordinary levels, some inner mind, emotional, vital etc. which the mind practised in poetical technique, works out according to its habitual faculty.” ( *The Future Poetry and Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art*, p.293) .

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp.236-37.

<sup>8</sup>“Sri Aurobindo's letters on *Savitri*,” *Savitri*, p.728.

<sup>9</sup>*Letters of Sri Aurobindo* ( Bombay: Sri Aurobindo Circle, 1947) , p.392.

<sup>10</sup>*The Future Poetry and Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art*, p.291.

<sup>11</sup>*Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, pp.54-5.

<sup>12</sup>“Sri Aurobindo's Letters on *Savitri*,” *Savitri*, p.727.

<sup>13</sup>*Savitri*, Book One, Canto Three, pp.38-9.

<sup>14</sup>*The Future Poetry and Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art*, pp.494-95.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p.212.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp.31-2.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p.224.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p.234.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p.491.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p.249.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p.225.

<sup>22</sup>Quoted by Manoj Das in *Sri Aurobindo* ( Delhi: Sahitya Akadami, 1982) , p.16.

<sup>23</sup>*The Future Poetry and Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art*, p.9.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p.10.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p.13.

<sup>26</sup>Quoted by Manoj Das in *Sri Aurobindo in the First Decade of the Present Century* ( Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972) , p.64.

## 4

## Poetry as an "Exposed, Open Form": Robert Duncan's Poetics

Though not among the great poet-critics such as Sidney, Dryden, Coleridge, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Robert Duncan has thought much about poetry and has made some illuminating statements on the theory and practice of his art which help us comprehend his own poetry and contemporary American poetry as well. The present paper attempts to cohere and interpret his ideas about poetry in order to arrive at a systematic poetics. Duncan's ideas about his own poetry and poetry in general are interspersed in his various articles, letters, interviews, and prefaces. The most important of his essays dealing with his statements about poetry are: "Towards an Open Universe," "Ideas of the Meaning of Form," "Notes on Poetics Regarding Olson's *Maximus*" and "From a Notebook."

What forms the nucleus of Duncan's over-all view of poetry is his belief that the poem is the creation of man's consciousness which is a meaningful amalgam of personal and cosmic identity. Everyman, and the poet more than anyone else, is as deeply concerned with the cosmos as with his household or his self; his imagination is preoccupied as much with the cosmos as with his earthly surroundings and his own being. Duncan observes: "Our consciousness, and the poem as a supreme effort of consciousness, comes in a dancing organisation between personal and cosmic identity."<sup>1</sup> He illustrates the poet's immediate concern with the cosmos as well as with his self in one of his early poems, "First Poem," which focuses both on "the birth of life itself in the primal waters" and on the poet's "birth-hour."

A poem, according to Duncan, presents life as an "articulated structure." That is to say, a poet believes that life is not without an innate coherence, and thus poetry follows the basic pattern of thought and feeling, "the immediate impulse of psychic

life." But howsoever orderly and systematic life may appear in its exterior semblance, the poet, by following the primary process of thought and feeling, is inescapably baffled by its complication. Nevertheless, he strives to establish a direct link with the vast cosmos, with the divine world. He vigorously attempts to embody and set forth the most real in the universe through the medium of language. The poet experiences the most real in the process of writing a poem, and thus the composition of a poem constitutes the realization of the truth of things which does not exit outside the work of art. Duncan says;

Each poet seeks to commune with creation, with the divine world; that is to say, he seeks the most *real* form in language. But this most real is something we apprehend; the poem the creation of the poem, is itself our primary experience of it.

We work toward the Truth of things. Keats's ecstatic "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" rises from the sureness of poetic intuition or of recognition, our instant knowing of fitness as we work in the poem, where the descriptive or analytic mind would falter.... What is at issue here is that the truth does not lie outside the art. For the experimenter it is more important to have beauty in one's experiments than to have them fit mathematics.<sup>2</sup>

Duncan believes that a great poem is an artistic configuration of the most real, of truth, of beauty, leading man to the beauty of the universe itself. The poet, the man, is only a part of the whole of what he is and is also an integral part of the cosmos. Duncan as a poet almost always has had the intuitive realization of this. His well-known poem "Atlantis" bears witness to it. However, this intuition of truth and beauty, which is highly striking within the context of the poem and loses much of its effect outside it, may emanate even from very fearful situations or from common human sufferings, losses and longings. For example, we discern beauty and truth in the highly tragic moments in the life of Oedipus when he sees reality at last, even after tearing out his eyes. Likewise, Duncan could have the intuition of truth and beauty in his experience of grief felt on the sad demise of his cat caused by pneumonia ( of course, it is just an ordinary human experience) , an experience which resulted in his famous poem, "A Storm of White." The poem embodies his reflection on life and

death, demonstrating his intuitive grasp of these two great truths.

According to Duncan the poet completely identifies himself with the poem; the two become one. Poetry re-creates cosmos in which the poet and the poem are one in a moving process. In fact, "to become the poet, means to be aware of creation, creature, and creator coinherent in the one event."<sup>3</sup> Duncan explains this poetic process by drawing an analogy between it and God and His creation. As with God and his creation, there is an immanence as well as an imminence of the poet and his creation.

The true artistic process and activity make the artist lose his consciousness of his own initiative, of his feeling, thinking or doing, and make him fully conscious of, and completely absorbed in, the artistic act itself. His self-consciousness is lost, not in the void, but in the transcendent consciousness, i.e. the great artistic act. This loss of personality or self-consciousness is, as a matter of fact, the heightening of consciousness, and hence with it the creative artist loses sensory impressions and his common awareness of time and space. He himself and his creative act become an embodiment of "*here-and-now* and *eternity*," of the person and of the cosmos. Duncan holds that it is this idea, more or less, that Charles Olson has tried to propound in his famous essay, "Projective Verse." Olson maintains that in the poem the mind is not to be diverted by what it wants to say, but it is to concentrate on what is happening immediately in the poem; it is only for the play of mind that we care most in a poem. And this play of mind is a natural, musical expression of our ever-expanding awareness of man's existence and his cosmos. To quote Duncan,

This play of heart and mind we see as the play of life itself in the extension of our language as life plays in the extension of our lifetime upon the threshold of consciousness between what man is and his Cosmos — the very fire of Heraclitus upon the hearth where the imagination of what man is and what the cosmos is burns.<sup>4</sup>

Duncan avers that the first strirrings, the germs of a poem, consist of an emotion, a realization of a world and a self. He illustrates this idea in his own poems. In "A Storm of White" or "Food for Fire, Food for Thought," the voice rises directly from

his looking at, waking in the night, the moving light and shadow reflected on a wall by a fire on the hearth which he forgot to extinguish before going to bed. Likewise, his poem entitled "A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar" was the result of his reading one evening the *Pythian Odes* translated by H.T. Wade-Gery and C.M. Bowra. It was his inability to comprehend Pindar and his affinity with him that quickened the germ of the poem. "In Pindar," says Duncan, "it is the harp of Apollo that the light foot of the dancer hears, but something had intruded, a higher reality for me, and it was the harp that heard the dancer."<sup>5</sup>

The poet has a hunger to live and to be true, and thus his creation, the poem, is as much concerned with truth as Mathematics — it aspires "to dream true, to forgive true, to come true." But the poet, Duncan asserts, is not after the truth which conclusively shuts the door on the universe, but after the truth which offers a certain openness to life, to the universe, and which does not circumscribe the cosmos but makes its frontiers open. Duncan suggests his concept of poetry as truth in search of an open universe thus:

Remembering Schrodinger's sense that the principle of life lies in its evasion of equilibrium, I think too of Goethe's Faust, whose principle lies in his discontent, not only in his search but also in his search beyond whatever answer he can know. Our engagement with knowing, with craft and lore, our demand for truth is not to reach a conclusion but to keep our exposure to what we do not know, to confront our wish and our need beyond habit and capability, beyond what we can take for granted, at the borderline, the light finger-tip or thought-tip where impulse and novelty spring.<sup>6</sup>

In Duncan's view, poetry is not an imitation of life, but an enactment, in its own order, of the things as they exist in the poet's consciousness. And what the poet intends is to delve deeper than the obvious matter and manner in order to comprehend and communicate the most real where thought-content and form merge into one, losing completely their separate identity and entity. Duncan, thus, deviates from the Imagists who have presented action, vision and thought having their separate, independent identity. He says: "...the poet desires to penetrate the seeming of style and subject matter to that most real where there is no

form that is not content, no content that is not form.”<sup>7</sup> In his assertion that the form and content are one and the same, he shows his close affinity with Flaubert, Henry James and Joyce Cary, though they are the practitioners of a different genre. But the core of his poetics is the conviction that the order or form the poet strives to impose upon the things he deals with or upon his own medium and style of expression is nothing in comparison with the natural or divine order which is easily discernible in them. Human senses and the sensory intelligence that appear so simple and common to us give such a complicated formal organization to things as we are able to perceive only their crudest aspects, and not the reality embodied in them. As Duncan affirms, even life itself is such a formal organisation in terms of time and space as it is beyond any human concept of design: “To be alive itself is a form involving organisation in time and space, continuity and body, that exceeds clearly our conscious design.”<sup>8</sup>

Content and form, meaning and language in poetry are inalienable from each other because poetry is an expression of the poet's felt experience in words, and neither any phase of our experience nor any phrase of our expression is meaningless. Patently, the poet does not impart meaning to the things he writes about; but in his effort to do so, he gets an awareness of meaning. His poem is only a natural expression of his consciousness of the personal and the cosmic identity, his awareness of order in the universe. By just doing this truthfully, the poet invariably lends a certain order and form to his thought and words. And thus the poem, which appears to be something highly organized, is, indeed, something very crude as compared with “the subtlety of organisation” which the study of syntax, etymology, morphology, psychology, etc. reveals. Duncan states:

...poetry reveals itself to us as we obey orders that appear in our work. In writing I do not organize words but follow my consciousness of... orders in the play of forms and meanings toward poetic form.... Becoming conscious, becoming aware of the order of what is happening is the full responsibility of the poet. The poem that always seems to us such a highly organized event is in its very individuality... crude indeed compared with the subtlety of organization which in the range of contemporary linguistic analysis the study of syntax, morphology,

etymology, psychology reveals in the language at large from which the poem is derived. The materials of the poem — the vowels and consonants — are already structured in their resonance, we have only to listen and to cooperate with the music we hear. The storehouse of human experience in words is resonant too, and we have but to listen to the reverberations of our first thought in the reservoir of communal meanings to strike such depths as touch upon the center of man's nature.<sup>9</sup>

Duncan has definite views on the meaning of form in art and poetry. Convention and conformity to well-established rules are, in his opinion, significant only in that they enable the artist to have control over his free thoughts, and thus over his creative work on the whole. Things without rhyme or reason have no meaning and have nothing to do with poetry. “But the genius of convention,” says Duncan, “that was brilliant in the 17th and 18th centuries, in our own is liable to come out small or trival.”<sup>10</sup> He rejects Miss Drew's plea for convention and regulated metres in poetry and calls her “a mistress of that critical demon” labelled as pusillanimity by Pound in his *Cantos*; she is just a devotee of “mechanical framework,” of “self-imposed necessity” against experience. As against this, Duncan repeatedly refers to Carlyle's sagacious remarks in “The Hero as Poet” about the poet's endeavour to seek music in the heart of things, melody in the language itself. Duncan deplores Miss Drew's complete failure in seeing a poetic line “as meaningful notation, where syllabic measures of variable number alternate with lines of two syllables to form a dance immediate to the eye as rhythmic pattern.”<sup>11</sup> Drew believes that a line is a matter of convention, and its meaning lies in either approving of or disapproving of what people have agreed on. She does not think that a line may be a notation of how it is to be read, and thus may have any other meaning. She does not understand the rhyming vowels in “glazed” and “rain,” “beside” and “white” that lend a balanced stress to the measure in the close. In short, her aim as a critic is not to discern the meaning and form of the poem, but to stand against them and not to attach full poetic significance to vowels, consonants, count of syllables, interchange of stresses, etc. Duncan points to her absurd, faulty distinction between verse and prose: verse

means that the rhythm turns and repeats itself, while prose signifies that it moves straight on.

Duncan affirms that even the contemporary verse, let alone unconventional poetry, does not conform to this approach to poetry. Thus he discards the narrow sense in which the word “convention” is used by mediocre critics simply for general conventionality, i.e. care for what other people think. He points out that celebrated conventional poets like Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell care more for personal necessity than for convention, and it is this which imparts vitality and greatness to their poetry. Elucidating his ideas in this regard, Duncan writes:

Convention, anyway, in these circles of literary critics and school masters is a proper mode, and seldom rises to any height above the general conventionality, having its roots ( like the unconventionality of “beats”) in what other men think. But in the vitality of poets, of Marianne Moore or of Robert Lowell, some personal necessity rather than social opportunity gives substance and meaning to their conventional verse. The rigorously counted syllables, the certainty of end rimes, the conformation of stanzas arise along lines, not of a self-imposed necessity but of a psyche need.<sup>12</sup>

Obviously, along with conventionality, personal necessity is needed to create a great poem. The poetry of Marianne Moore, in Duncan's opinion, brilliantly illustrates it. In fact, she is the creator of both conventional poetry and free verse. In some of her earlier poems like “In the Days of Prismatic Color” and “An Octopus,” we note clearly the strain of free verse in that the movement of the language has the vigor of a feeling and thought without self-consciousness. “Here the number of lines in the stanza,” says Duncan, “can vary with the immediate sense of movement, and the actual kept feeling of the tempo gives measure rather than the systematic repeated count of syllables or the emphasis of rimes at the end of lines.”<sup>13</sup>

Duncan points out that great art or poetry is deeply concerned with inner meaning and experience, and so what is basically wrong with the rationalistic aesthetics of poetry with its focus on convention is that it is against the dream and inner life of man. The rationalistic obsession kills the artist's spiritual inspiration, his revelation of soul, and his first-hand intuition, and

leads to the crisis of enlightenment. It was this rationalistic obsession that completely paralysed Coleridge's poetic inspiration in his later years. In support of his attack on the unhealthy effect of the rationalistic aesthetics, Duncan quotes Keats' views on Coleridge's failure as a poet after his early masterpieces:

The crisis of the Enlightenment was the crisis that Keats saw recapitulated in Coleridge's collapse from the inspiration of “The Ancient Mariner” and “Cristobel” to the psychic despair, the rationalist obsession, of later years. “The Ancient Mariner” had evoked the revelation of the soul in terms of world exploration; “Cristobel” had evoked the revelation of the soul in terms of psychic threat that came from sexual lore condemned by Christendom.<sup>14</sup>

The rational, conventional attitude towards life and art kills the “negative capability” in the artist, as he becomes incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge, or living in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts. Naturally, Duncan is against the rationalistic art because it strives to control nature, to conceive of beauty as the imposed order visible in its very external form, and to achieve certainty of effect. To him, the conventional poetic art is disgusting because it cares much for control over common speech, for disciplining syntax and line into balanced phrases and regular metres, and ignores meaningful experience or intuition of the universe and the energies of the language itself. Thus the poetic art of the 17th and 18th centuries — the age of reason and good sense — with its stress on convention, rules heroic couplet, etc., lacks the very vitality of art. Hence Duncan is a staunch supporter of free verse, of free thought and movement, and does not find much validity in Robert Frost's assertion that to write free verse is like playing tennis with the net down:

But, for those who see life as something other than a tennis game, without bounds, and who seek in their sciences and arts to come into that life, into an imagination of that life, the thought comes that the counterpart of free verse may be free thought and free movement. The explorer displays the meaning of physical excellence in a way different from that displayed by the tennis player.<sup>15</sup>

Duncan's primary concern is with the real. Inevitably, it does not matter much whether he likes or dislikes a poem by Charles Olson or by Robert Creeley; what matters most to him is that a

poem should be an evidence of the real. And since the conventional concept of form excludes much of the real, the living in the universe, and cares only for what can be imposed, Duncan is averse to it because it terribly limits the frontiers of poetry and makes it narrow. He maintains:

What form is to the conventional mind is just what can be imposed, the rest is thought of as lacking in form. Taste can be imposed, but love and knowledge are conditions that life imposes upon us if we would come into her melodies. It is taste that holds out against feeling, originality that tries to hold out against origins. For taste is all original, all individual arbitration.<sup>16</sup>

As in the conventional poetic form knowledge, precision and rules are attached unusual importance, spiritual experience and intuition grasp of the real which have a lot of vagueness about them are almost completely ignored. Consequently, the poet is not able to attain the state of “negative capability” and great poetic heights, explained and emphasized by Keats as the secret of Shakespeare's greatness.

This explains why Duncan favours the revival of the romantic spirit in style, and speaks of the pleasures and thrills in Coleridge and Poe. And this accounts for the radical disagreement Charles Olson has with him, since the former is all for the *virtu* of reality and sees no real wisdom in the latter's romantic predilection. However, despite his *penchant* for the romantic style, Duncan attaches value to the basic traits of classical poetic style like rigour and clarity as much as to vagueness and evasiveness. What is fundamental to him is the intensity of conception. He declares: “ I like rigor and even clarity as a quality of a work — that is, as I like muddle and floaty vagaries. It is the intensity of conception that moves me.... And certainly I like intensely evasive art...”<sup>17</sup> Duncan refers to Mallarme's famous theory, “ the area of the page is a void of meaning upon which, into which, in which, the poem appears,”<sup>18</sup> and affirms that this is strikingly different from the later Expressionism which considers the poem as a psychological event, and also from the classical concept of ideas and emotions expressed as perfectly as possible. Little wonder Duncan the poet feels fascinated by the ‘private mean-

ingless pleasures,” by the depths of thoughts and feelings and by the private ecstasies which transport him to new heights and dimensions. What he stresses most is that in art everything is possible, and nothing in it should circumscribe “the flowering of being into its particular forms.”<sup>19</sup> And this is what characterizes the great works like the *Cantos*, *Useful Knowledge*, *Finnegans Wake* and Helen Adams's ballads and Scrapbooks.

Duncan endorses Carlyle's famous assertion in the essay, “Hero as Poet,” that poetry is musical thought. All speech, even the most ordinary expression, has something of a song in it, for all men have their own accent, and accent is a kind of chanting. When it is so, all passionate language automatically becomes musical, and thus all deep things are songs. This also accounts for our age-old belief in “Sphere-Harmonies” and in the perfect music in all the voices and utterances of Nature. The poet is one who thinks and feels deeply, and is thus essentially musical. His creation, the poem, is inevitably “the instrument of music that he makes from men's speech.”<sup>20</sup> Just as the music of poetry is closely related to the music of the inner structure of Nature, so is the beauty of mathematics to the beauty of the inner structure of the physical universe. That is to say, all great human activities and expressions are almost an imitations and interpretation of the inner structure of the physical, open universe. While poetry gets music naturally from the words it uses, it, in Duncan's opinion, also lends a true life to the words it employs. And since the poem is an expression of the poet's total being — heart, mind, sensory skin, etc. — its language, which is the organization of words in it, has inescapably the stamp of the total being of the poet. In support of his assertion, Duncan quotes Charles Olson who “has made us aware that not only heart and brain and the sensory skin but all the internal organs, the totality of the body is involved in the act of a poem, so that the organization of words, an invisible body, bears the imprint of the physical man, the finest imprint that we feel in our own bodies as a tonic consonance and dissonance, a being-in-tune, a search for the as yet missing scale.”<sup>21</sup>

Duncan avers that in modern American poetry the striding syllables point to a new aesthetic based on energies. Charles Olson's *Maximus* is not the first to embody this new aesthetic; the writings of Emerson and John Dewey have clearly foreshadowed it. For instance, John Dewey in *Art as Experience* has observed that order, rhythms and balance mean simply the best possible working of energies significant for experience. "In this aesthetic," says Duncan, "conception cannot be abstracted from doing; beauty is related to the beauty of an archer hitting the mark. Referred to its source in the act, the intellect actually manifest as energy, as presence is doing, is the measure of our *are'te*."<sup>22</sup> Poetry becomes the language of act, moving towards act. To illustrate it, Duncan refers to Pound's *How to Read* in which the writer discusses three kinds of poetry, the last of which, named *logopoeia*, is particularly relevant in this regard. By "*logopoeia*" Pound means the dance of the intellect among words, and describes it as placement and displacement of words to define or conveys the dance as it is seen. This third mode of poetry, which is quite difficult, attaches great significance to the meaning level, for it uses words not only for their direct meaning, but also for their special usages and ironic plays, and thus its manifestation is mainly verbal. But *logopoeia* is as much a psychological manifestation as a verbal one. In Duncan's words, "Ambiguities, word-play, ironies, disassociations appear as we watch the meanings; but it is the action of the language, the muscular correlation of the now differentiated parts of the poem, that so expresses itself."<sup>23</sup> Duncan further holds that if the realization of the energy of language is the latest mode of poetry, the beginning of it was also muscular "localized in the discharge of energy expressed in the gaining, first, breath, and then, tongue."<sup>24</sup> Duncan explains it with the help of James Joyce's works. He says that in the modern psychological age, *Ulysses*, like the *Cantos* and Marianne Moore's or William Carlos Williams' works, is a masterpiece of this third kind of poetry called *logopoeia* by Pound, while *Finnegans Wake* shifts to the beginnings because in it "meanings are being churned up, digested back into the original chaos of noises,

decomposed."<sup>25</sup> Duncan agrees with Olson that words in poetry must be used very carefully and must be invested with energy, and that the eyes and ears should be allowed to perform their functions fully in the language of poetry.

Duncan uses the appellation "Exposed, Open Form" to his view of poetry which, according to him, is quite close to Olson's concept of "Projective Verse." He does not claim originality in this regard, and avers that this new approach to art and literature began to appear in the 1940's with the publication of the *Pisan Cantos* by Ezra Pound, *Paterson* by William Carlos Williams, and *Symphony in Three Movements* by Stravinsky. What he precisely means by the "Expose, Open Form" is "that one might concentrate upon the sound and meaning present where one was, and derive melody and story from impulse not from plan."<sup>26</sup> Like him, other fellow poets such as Louis Zukofsky, Charles Olson, Denise Levertov and Robert Creeley were also greatly influenced by Pound and Williams, and under their impact they, like him, realized "that what they had mastered opened out upon a new art where they were first ones working."<sup>27</sup> This new approach was not only confined to poetry or literature alone; in music John Cage, Pierre Boulez and Karlheing Stockhausen came under the impact of Stravinsky, Schoenberg and Webern, who, they realized, not only mastered what music was, but also opened out upon what music ought to be and might be.

Duncan thinks that this new, changing aesthetics is the result of the changing view of life in recent decades brought about by Atomic Physics. He points out that now "we recognize as never before in man's history that not only our own personal consciousness but the inner structure of the universe itself has only this immediate event in which to be realized."<sup>28</sup> Another aspect of the new sense of life which underlies the new concept of art and literature is that the present is all important, for it contains all that there is for man because it is the past as well as the future. That is to say, "men have come to again and again in their most intense or deepest vision, that the kingdom is here, that we have only now in which to live — that the universe has only now in which to live."<sup>29</sup>

## References

- <sup>1</sup>"Towards an Open Universe," *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, ed. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman ( Evergreen Edition; New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1979) ,p.214.
- <sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp.214-15.
- <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.218.
- <sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp.220-21.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid., p.223.
- <sup>6</sup>Ibid., p.224.
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid., p.217.
- <sup>8</sup>Ibid., p.218.
- <sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp.218-19.
- <sup>10</sup>"Ideas of the Meaning of Form," *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, ed. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman, p.199.
- <sup>11</sup>Ibid., p.200.
- <sup>12</sup>Ibid., p.201.
- <sup>13</sup>Ibid., p.203
- <sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp.206-07.
- <sup>15</sup>Ibid., p.209.
- <sup>16</sup>Ibid., p.210.
- <sup>17</sup>"From a Notebook," *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, ed. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman, p.185.
- <sup>18</sup>Ibid., p.186.
- <sup>19</sup>Ibid., p.187.
- <sup>20</sup>"Towards an Open Universe," p.223.
- <sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp.223-24.
- <sup>22</sup>"Notes on Poetics Regarding Olson's *Maximus*," *The Poetic of the New American Poetry*, ed. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman, p.188.
- <sup>23</sup>Ibid., p.191.
- <sup>24</sup>Ibid., p.192.
- <sup>25</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup>"Towards an Open Universe," p.224.
- <sup>27</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup>Ibid.

## 5

## Sarojini Naidu: A Preface to Her Poetry

## I

Notwithstanding her scanty poetic output — just four slender collections of poems, namely, *The Golden Threshold* ( 1905) , *The Bird of Time* ( 1912) , *The Broken Wing* ( 1915) and *The Feather of the Dawn* ( 1961) , and almost all of her poems appearing in one volume of modest length entitled *The Sceptred Flute* — and that too the product of her immature years only, Sarojini Naidu occupies a unique place among Indian English poets. Poetry came to her as naturally as fragrance to the flower. Her literary compositions are saturated with poetic essence, and hence fascinate every *sahridaya*, genuine reader. She is a poet out and out, and the poet in her never dies. Poetry and politics dominated her entire life span, but poetry remained her first love. Obviously, even when she was immersed in politics, she remained, in essence, a poet easily perceptible in her eloquently poetic speeches, conversations, prose and love of life and colours. No wonder she was called “Bharat Kokila” by Mahatma Gandhi who did not have any noticeable liking for poetry and music perhaps because of his preoccupation with the country's struggle for freedom, and was subsequently known as “the Nightingale of India,” not because she had composed some lovely lyrics but because poetry supremely reigned her very mode of life, her feelings, thoughts, actions and expressions.

## II

Numerous influences shaped the mind and art of Sarojini Naidu. Undoubtedly, the most potent impact on her was that of her father, Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya, from whom she inherited the dreamworld of love, life and vast vision that she inhabited throughout her mortal existence. In the poem, “In Salutation to

My Father's Spirit,” she acknowledges her indebtedness to her father by highlighting his dreamy wisdom and his love for life, liberty, discipline, truth, fearlessness, etc.:

O splendid dreamer in a dreamless age  
Whose deep alchemic vision reconciled  
Time's changing message with the undefiled  
Calm wisdom of thy Vedic heritage!  
Farewell great spirit, without fear or flaw,  
Thy life was love and liberty the law,  
And truth thy pure imperishable goal....  
All hail to thee in thy transcendent flight  
From hope to hope, from height to heav'nlier height,  
Lost in the rapture of the Cosmic Soul.<sup>1</sup>

Again, in the preface to *The Golden Threshold*, she speaks of the dreaminess, scholarship and asceticism of her ancestors, particularly her father, in these words:

My ancestors for thousands of years have been lovers of the forest and the mountain caves, great dreamers, great scholars, great ascetics. My father is a dreamer himself, a great dreamer, a great man whose life has been a magnificent failure.<sup>2</sup>

Her father, though an alchemist, was a poet in his own way, and would recite poems. He had a profound sense of beauty and curiosity, and was thus a great artist himself. An alchemist's quest for beauty is very much like that of a poet, as Sarojini Naidu affirms:

But this alchemy is, you know, only the material counterpart of a poet's craving for Beauty, the eternal Beauty. The makers of gold and the makers of verse, they are the twin creators that sway the world's secret desire for mystery; and what in my father is the genius of curiosity — in me is the desire for beauty.<sup>3</sup>

From her mother, Varda Sundari, Sarojini learnt to translate dreams and visions into reality by rendering them into exquisite songs. Her mother was a poetess whose lyrics would emanate spontaneously from her innermost, felt experiences and dreams. In her mother's company, she discovered the beauty and the sordid realities of life. Thus her parents' home overflowed with science, curiosity, beauty, music and poetry. No wonder, then, if Harindranath Chattopadhyaya describes it “a museum of wisdom and culture, a zoo crowded with a medley of strange types —

some even verging on the mystic, for our home was open to all alike."<sup>4</sup> As Sarojini found the members of this home well-versed in several languages and literatures without believing in caste and religion, her mind knew no barriers and she wrote, with equal interest and depth, about Hindus, Muslims and Christians.

The members of the "Rhymers' Club" exerted tremendous influence on Sarojini Naidu when she was in England at the age of sixteen for higher education and from these English men, who were writers and critics of literature, she learnt the new rhythm and style of poetry and came in contact with the then prevalent trends in literature and art. It was at this time when she did nothing but write poetry that she came in contact with Edmund Gosse, who gave a right direction to her poetic genius. This was why she dedicated her collection of poems entitled *The Golden Threshold* to him with the remark that "he first showed me the way to the Golden Threshold."<sup>5</sup> Following his advice, she showed the Orient to the Western eyes, and wrote about the snow-capped Himalayas, the champak flower, the jasmine garlands, the exciting Indian scenes, etc., instead of English flowers, scenes and sights. It was under the influence of Edmund Gosse that she threw into the waste-paper basket her early poems written on Western themes. The result was that in the introduction to *The Bird of Times*, Edmund Gosse accentuated the Indianness of Sarojini in these words: "She springs from the very soil of India; her spirit, although it employs the English language as its vehicle, has no other ties with the West."<sup>6</sup> Arthur Symons was fascinated by Sarojini's Indianness and encouraged her to stick to it. No doubt, nineteenth-century English poets like Shelley, Keats, Tennyson and Swinburne attracted her and influenced her poetic art, but her themes and imagery remained Indian in essence.

More than the Western influence, her own felt experiences shaped her mind and art greatly. She was bubbling with life and this is clearly perceptible in her writings. Her tossing between joys and sorrows was owing to her vivacious spirit and ill-health. Her profound love of nature she inherited from her ancestors, and so she once said to Arthur Symons: "My ancestors for thousands

of years have been lovers of the forest and mountain caves...."<sup>7</sup> She often realised that she was inseparable from nature, and consequently her ecstasy born of the charms of nature is fully expressed in her poetry. It would not be an exaggeration if we state that her oneness with the joy and beauty of nature and life engendered the poet in her. She had an unfathomable love of life which dominated her all activities throughout her life. Apropos of her attachment for life, Arthur Symons quotes her to have remarked once: "How can one deliberately renounce this coloured, unquiet, fiery human life on earth."<sup>8</sup>

Sarojini's intimacy, love and marriage with Dr. Govindurajulu Naidu moulded, to a great extent, her life in all its variegated aspects. Her strong, adolescent love for Mr. Naidu did not weaken even when she was sent to England and was separated from him for years. Her love for Mr. Naidu was a marriage of true minds of which she repeatedly speaks in her poems. She settled with her husband in Hyderabad, and lived in a house called the "Golden Threshold" where she had exquisite visions resulting in some very beautiful poems. About her early married days spent in the "Golden Threshold," she writes: "It is all I need to make my life perfect, for the very 'Spirit of Delight' that Shelley wrote of dwells in my home, it is full of the music of birds in the garden and children in the long arched verandah."<sup>9</sup>

Sense of curiosity and quest for beauty and joy formed an intrinsic part of Sarojini's being. Love, marriage, motherhood and intimacy with nature filled her with these desires and quests. Often nature would dazzle her by its lively hues and would bring to her vision of Gods "sitting under the olives, in their grave, strong antique beauty — Etruscan Gods!"<sup>10</sup> Naturally, she felt a close affinity with Pater, and during a conversation with Arthur Symons she referred to the aesthete's famous statement: "Do you remember Pater's phrase about Leonardo De Vinci, 'curiosity and the desire for beauty?'"<sup>11</sup>

The conflict between tradition and modernity in Sarojini and her humanism and progressiveness were the result of the city of Hyderabad and the transitional period in which she chanced to

live. The culture she acquired in Hyderabad and the modern education she got in this city and in England split her personality; she strongly felt the pulls of tradition and modernity. Soon she developed her philosophy of proletarian humanism, and had the notion of a classless society. Consequently, she achieved a healthy synthesis of modernity and tradition. In the city of Hyderabad, she came in close contact with many intellectual and aesthetic women, who at the same time observed the purdah system. It was also an age of political upheaval, and the call for freedom from the foreign rule was heard in every nook and cranny of the country. It was an era of unrest and ideal social order. Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Gandhiji bewitched the Indians and influenced them unfathomably. Under their impact, Sarojini came out of the ivory tower of her dream-world and poetry, and devoted herself wholeheartedly to the masses with hope. Hence, it is not surprising if her poetry, particularly the later one, focuses on joy and optimism in the midst of grief and on the invincible spirit that can relieve the suffering humanity of sorrow.

### III

Sarojini the poetess is primarily preoccupied with some of the fundamental aspects of human life — viz. love, life, death and fate. Obviously, the themes running through her literary output are not of merely temporal value but of permanent significance, lending her poetry remarkable universality. Many of her lyrics exquisitely deal with the variegated emotions and moods generated in man by love. She shows love as a great gift of the benevolent God and an inevitable expression of joy and beauty. Naturally, it pervades the entire cosmos. However, her love poems mainly deal with physical, innocent love inseparable from joys and sorrows, though the mystical element is clearly interwoven into the sensuous and passionate side of love. True love knows no bounds of caste, creed, race and myths, as is demonstrated in her beautiful lyric, “An Indian Love Song.” At times she shows love ‘exotically sentimental’ as evidenced in poems like “A Rajput

Love Song” and “The Poet’s Love Song.” In these poems love is a tempestuous desire, an unending longing, a sort of madness of dreams, and “the magic of wild melodies.” “A Love Song from the North” concentrates on another side of love — the loneliness and longing of the broken love. But in the lyric, “At Twilight,” we come across just the opposite picture of love as profound joy, filling people with hopes and dreams, dispelling hatred:

And love’s delight, profound and passionate,  
Winged dreams that blow their golden clarion,  
And hope that conquers immemorial hate.<sup>12</sup>

A similar kind of love assuming supreme power forms the core of the poem, “Damayanti to Nala.” Sarojini sings of the omnipotence and transcendental power of love in the exquisite poems, “Love Omnipotence,” “Love Transcendent” and “Love Triumphant,” whereas in “The Illusion of Love,” she stresses that love is not something merely external and illusory but a deep reality steeped in profound philosophy. The long poem, “The Temple”, presents love as an idol, and as such the pilgrims of love are asked to offer new-blown leaves on “the gleaming altars-stones of love.”<sup>13</sup> The superiority of love over death is shown in “Twilight Star,” while the lover’s obsession with the incense of the worship of love is depicted in “The Worship of Love.” The unalterable nature of ideal, true love is stressed in the well-known poem, “Love’s Guerdon.” On the other hand, Sarojini treats the psychology of the madness of love, when betrayed, in the poem, “The Menace of Love.” The lover’s craving to become one with the other is the central idea of the lyric, “Devotion,” while “Caprice” brings out the grief in the life of the beloved caused by the lover’s indifference. Separation as the main cause of pathos in the life of the lover is highlighted in the lyric, “Destiny.” Thus Sarojini Naidu has touched almost each and every shade, mood and aspect of love, right from the physical to the transcendental, from the grievous to the blissful, and from the tender and lovable to the fierce and hateful. The acme of her love poetry can be seen in lines such as the following:

O Love, is there aught I should fear to fulfil at your word?  
Your will my weak hands with such dauntless light would endow

To capture and tame the wild tempest to sing like a debird,  
 And bend the swift lightning to fashion a crown for your brow,  
 Unfurl the sealed triumph of Time like a foot-cloth outspread,  
 And rend the cold silence that conquers the lips of the dead.<sup>14</sup>

#### IV

Sarojini Naidu's poems deal with the simple totality of life much in the same way as the poems of the Hindi saint-poet Kabir. She expresses her explicit faith in life, which is a continuous struggle testing man all the time. Life, according to her, is the acceptance of challenges of all types. In the poem, "Life," she points out that the failure of desires impels man to struggle against, and set aside, the forces of life crushing man's wishes and aspirations. She defines life as a challenge, and not merely a fulfilment of dreams. Therefore, she affirms that her children have not lived life, since to them

Life is a lovely stalactite of dreams,  
 Or carnival of careless joys that leap  
 About your hearts like billows on the deep  
 In flames of amber and of amethyst.<sup>15</sup>

But it does not mean that man's conviction in life is shaken by defeat or despair; man must be in love with life, living each moment with joy and zeal. Obviously, her vision of life is replete with optimism and hope, as is evident from the lines quoted below:

But soon we must rise, O my heart, we must wander again  
 Into the war of the world and the strife of the throng;  
 Let us rise, O my heart, let us gather the dreams that remain,  
 We will conquer the sorrow of life with the sorrow of song.<sup>16</sup>

Sarojini Naidu clearly expresses her faith that the real life in its moments of actual living can be seen only in the labouring millions, who swim on the ever-flowing river of life, forgetting their sufferings in their painful songs. She explicitly gives vent to her unflinching belief in the "living ecstasy"<sup>17</sup> and in "the essence of eternity,"<sup>18</sup> rejecting the sense of loneliness and reaffirming the basic values of life. Her robust view of life also finds an expression in her speeches, and in this context her following words, addressed to the people of Asia, may be quoted:

I bid you arise from your graves.... I bid you all. Whatever your faith, whatever your creed, whatever your tongue, march on, move onwards and onwards, higher and higher till we ascend to the stars.... Men should not be discouraged by anything that may befall us, for it is a part of my creed and my tradition and my heritage to believe that nothing can die that is good.<sup>19</sup>

This is possible only when people live united adhering to the principle of universal brotherhood and that of the world as one home, as accentuated by the wandering singers:

Where the voice of the wind calls our wandering feet,  
 Through echoing forest and echoing street,  
 With lutes in our hands ever-singing we roam,  
 All men our kindred, the world is our home.<sup>20</sup>

Sarojini Naidu stresses that life accords its bliss to men of action. She truly holds mirror to life, showing that life is ultimately a pilgrimage in search of the Supreme Truth. Thus life is a 'cosmic ripple,' and not a meaningless, transient 'bubble;' it is real, true and perennial, granting man emancipation from past and future.

#### V

Inseparable from life is death which forms one of the dominant themes of Sarojini Naidu's poetry. In the beautiful poem, "The Soul's Prayer," she defines life and death in one breath in relation to herself:

*"Life is a prism of My light,  
 And Death the shadow of My face."*<sup>21</sup>

However, before defining life and death, she, in her quest for the knowledge of the grave, requests the great Master to reveal to her

Thine inmost laws of life and death.<sup>22</sup>

Thinking about the relationship between love and death, she feels unhappy to see the superiority of death over love, though the latter affords man temporary, insignificant relief. The poem, "Love and Death," apparently expresses ideas strikingly different from those of Shakespeare in his famous sonnets on the subject. But the physical end of our being is not something permanent; death is not the full stop of life, but only a brief significant pause in the continuous flow of life, though full of agony, anguish and

pangs accompanying manifold strife. Apropos of the silence of death, she, in the typical Indian tradition, writes in the exquisite lyric, "Solitude":

Come away, come away from this throng and its tumult of sorrow,  
There is rest, there is peace from the pang of its manifold strife.  
Where the halcyon night holds in trust the dear songs of the morrow,  
And the silence is but a rich pause in the music of life.<sup>23</sup>

Death, according to Sarojini Naidu, is an unquestionable reality, and so the idea of, and craving for, ceaseless happiness is the rejection of self-discovery and truth. But death does not stand for the burning hell; as a matter of fact, it is to be taken as a brief state of oblivion and sleep. Naturally, it puts to an end the fever and the fret of life:

Hark, from the brooding silence  
Breaks the wild cry of pain  
Wrung from the heart of the ages<sup>24</sup>

Sarojini Naidu affirms that man's great, immortal deeds and achievements transcend the ravages of death. Man's realisation of his noble mission makes him ignore death completely. The following lines from the beautiful poem, "Imperial Delhi", serve to illustrate the point:

Thy changing kings and kingdoms pass away  
The gorgeous legends of a bygone day,  
But thou dost still immutably remain  
Unbroken symbol of proud histories  
Unageing priestess of old mysteries  
Before whose shrine the spells of Death are vain.<sup>25</sup>

However, Sarojini Naidu is not preoccupied with the profound mysteries of life and death in her poetry. There is nothing of the metaphysical element in her delineation of death. She presents a contrast to Keats in as much as she does not think of death as a refuge from life's strife, frustration and failures. The reason is that she is madly in love with life and all its gifts and joys. Patently, she repeatedly expresses her belief in the eternity of life, and not in death as the end of life. For instance, in "The Old Woman," she affirms:

The pageant of life going blithely and fleet  
To the feast of eternity.<sup>26</sup>

Repose and eternal silence are the marked features of her vision of life. What is remarkable about her concept of death is her acceptance of this reality of human existence, though the most painful one, as a part of the loveliness of life that is eternal.

## VI

Defiance of Fate is a recurrent note in Sarojini Naidu's poetry, and hence an integral part of her poetic vision. She refuses to bow down before the freakishness and waywardness of mighty Fate. In this respect, she reminds us of the great legendary Savitri of ancient India. She is fully aware of the havoc that Destiny inflicts upon human life, and of the human efforts ending in smoke because of its strange ways. In the poem, "A Challenge to Fate," she elaborates some of the ravages with which Fate fondly endeavours to crush human beings. An indifferent 'dragon-fly' and 'black-winged,' as Sarojini Naidu calls Fate, it often deprives life of beauty, drains "the life of a passion-flower,"<sup>27</sup> shatters the ivory tower of dreams and tortures people by overwhelming them with fear and hate.<sup>28</sup> To Sarojini, the failures, griefs, fears, etc., caused by Fate to oppress human beings, are an essential part of life, which will but be incomplete and shallow without them. In the poem, "Life," the poetess asks her children to draw lessons from the fluctuations in human destiny and the fickleness of Fate:

Till ye have battled with great grief and fears,  
And borne the conflict of dream-shattering years,  
Wounded with fierce desire and worn with strife,  
Children, ye have not lived: for this is life.<sup>29</sup>

According to her, much can be achieved in life through sufferings and pains. Joys and sorrows are inseparable, and do not have separate entities, since they are only two sides of a single reality.

However, Sarojini Naidu does not conceive of Fate as merely a blind force moving man to an inescapable tragic end; it is much more than that, as it sometimes brings unexpected success and joy to man. Fate is a mystery, and is as strange and unknowable as future. What makes Sarojini's poetry invaluable to us is her unflinching conviction that Fate, however powerful, cannot divest

human life of hope and that the world abounds in things which amply make amends for the losses caused by Fate. In the poem, "A Challenge to Fate," she tells us that even in its most fearful and torturous mood, Fate cannot deprive her of "scatheless spirit," "the bridal rapture," "the lyric pageant," "the surging harmonies of battling tempests and unconquered seas," the sweet tune of "the ten thousand voices of the spring," the free play of fancy into the unknown self-satisfying regions, etc.<sup>30</sup> Sarojini continually impresses upon our mind that Fate can overwhelm only those who have weak will and sprit. She knows that the malignant Fate is strong enough to nip in the bud all her dreams and aspirations, and can threaten her very existence; still she evinces wonderful courage to challenge it to tame and crush her invincible spirit. In a loud, defiant tone, she says:

Tho' you deny the hope of all my being,  
Betray my love, my sweetest dream destroy,  
Yet will I slake my individual sorrow  
At the deep source of universal joy...  
O Fate, in vain you hanker to control  
My frail, serene, indomitable soul.<sup>31</sup>

For Sarojini Naidu, fearlessness is the weapon by which we can easily face the ravages of Fate. In addition to it, she believes that the beauties of nature, supreme human virtues and the love of the Eternal are the inexhaustible fountains of joy and strength before which the cruelties of Fate appear meaningless to man and life becomes simply wonderful to him. Apropos of this unique power of nature, Sarojini Naidu writes in the poem, "Spring in Kashmir":

If spring grants us but one rich tulip for token,  
Shall we fear if on Fortune's blind wheel we are broken?<sup>32</sup>

In Sarojini Naidu's view, man rises above the plane of Fate's destructive activities by practising supreme human virtues like good done to others, hope and love given to the suffering humanity, purity of action and truthfulness, and performance of deeds prompted by a sense of righteousness, regardless of terrible consequences, etc. Thus in the short lyric entitled "Invincible," she defies Fate in the following words:

O Fate, betwixt the grinding-stones of Pain,  
Tho' you have crushed my life like broken grain,  
Lo! I will leaven it with my tears and knead  
The bread of Hope to comfort and to feed  
The myriad hearts for whom no harvests blow  
Save bitter herbs of woe.

Tho' in the flame of Sorrow you have thrust  
My flowering soul and trod it into dust,  
Behold, it doth reblossom like a grove  
To shelter under quickening boughs of Love,  
The myriad souls for whom no garden bloom  
Save bitter buds of doom?<sup>33</sup>

Time and again, Sarojini Naidu sets forth her conviction that it is the belief in the Infinite that subdues the fury of Fate. Speaking of God who is much greater than Fate, she writes:

We praise Thee, O Compassionate!  
Master of Life and Time and Fate,  
Lord of the labouring winds and seas,  
... ..  
... ..  
Thou art the Goal for which we long,  
Thou art our Silence and our Song,  
Life of the sunbeam and the seed —<sup>34</sup>

God is far greater than Destiny, and He preserves life against the onslaught of Destiny by filling man with life-sustaining joy. Eternal joy can be experienced only by those who have unswerving belief in God, and have strength to defeat the evil designs of Fate. Sarojini Naidu herself lived a life of this type. She continually suffered from ill-health, but soon her unconquerable spirit would come out of such a state of despondency triumphantly. Her 'scatheless spirit' continually challenges Fate, and has the courage to call it foolish and say to it in vociferous, bold voice:

..., O foolish Fate?  
You cannot break me with your poignant envy,  
You cannot slay me with your subtle hate:  
For all the cruel folly you pursue  
I will not cry with suppliant hands to you.<sup>35</sup>

In fact, Sarojini Naidu pins her impenetrable faith in the superiority of divinity over doom, of life over death. It is with this conviction that she defies Fate and sings of the glories of life.

## VII

After a brief discussion of the major themes in Sarojini Naidu's poetry, it is not out of place to make some observations on her poetic technique in this short analysis and appraisal of her poetry. Surely she is not a consummate artist and metrist; still we unfailingly detect in her poetry a very subtle artistry. She is very particular about the choice of words and phrases. Despite her spontaneous lyricism, she is a deliberate artist. What is remarkable about her is the synthesis of thought or meaning and form or style. The rhythm of each one of her poems is pleasant and commensurate with the thought-contents, and her rhythms are seldom dull and uncouth. Her poetry is marked by rich variety of imagery and exquisite epithets like 'rainbow-tangled mist,' 'gem-tangled hair,' 'soul-deep in visions,' 'flower-like bodies,' 'rose-scented nights,' 'laughter-lighted faces,' 'slumber-soft feet,' 'moon-light-tangled meshes of perfume,' 'silver-breasted moonbeam of desire,' etc.

Sarojini Naidu is very particular about the appropriate metres, musical words and vowel sounds. She does not attach over-importance to vowel music, though she is very fond of it. The charge against her that to her sound is more important than sense is not true. Nevertheless, she cares for metre and versification, and invests her ideas with music and colour. The very first poem in the collection of her poems, *The Sceptred Flute*, bears witness to it. The first stanza of the poem, "Palanquin-Bearers", can be quoted to show her mastery of rhythm, music and movement:

Lightly, O lightly, we bear her along,  
 She sways like a flower in the wind of our song;  
 She skims like a bird on the foam of a stream,  
 She floats like a laugh from the lips of a dream.  
 Gaily, O gaily we glide and we sing,  
 We bear her among like a pearl on a string.<sup>36</sup>

Sarojini Naidu evinces a rare command of the English language. In this respect, she emulates Indian English poets like Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Sri Aurobindo. With utmost ease she expresses her ideas in appropriate English poetic form. Almost

all of her poems clearly evidence it. For instance, the felicity and suitability of her eloquent poetic expression, marked by a rare poetic musicality and a sense of colour, can be seen in the first stanza of one of her early poems, "The Pardah Nashin," quoted below:

Her life is a revolving dream  
 Of languid and sequestered ease;  
 Her girdles and her fillets gleam  
 Like changing fires on sunset seas;  
 Her raiment is like morning mist,  
 Shot opal, gold and amethyst.<sup>37</sup>

Her expression is crystal clear, simple and mellifluous.

Sarojini Naidu's poetry is exceptionally rich not only in lyricism and elemental simplicity of expression, but also in imagery. Her superb comprehension and communication of beauty in life is evident in the wonderful, abundant images with which her poetry is studded. Her imagery is essentially Indian, simple and suitable. She is very fond of using personification, and her similes and metaphors are functional, and not mere decoration. Her symbolic use of imagery and figures of speech is marked by a rare simplicity. The short lyric, "Caprice," reproduced below, fully illustrates it:

You held a wild-flower in your finger-tips,  
 Idly you pressed it to indifferent lips,  
 Idly you tore its crimson leaves apart....  
 Alas ! it was my heart.  
 You held a wine-cup in your finger-tips,  
 Lightly you raised it to indifferent lips,  
 Lightly you drank and flung away the bowl....  
 Alas! it was my soul.<sup>38</sup>

Again, the concluding four lines of the last poem in *The Sceptred Flute* can be cited to show her command of simple, natural poetic technique — rhythm, rhyme, metre, imagery, figures of speech, etc.:

Strangle my soul and fling it into the fire!  
 Why should my true love falter or fear or rebel?  
 Love, I am yours to lie in your breast like a flower,  
 Or burn like a weed for your sake in the flame of hell.<sup>39</sup>

In conclusion, it may be affirmed that Sarojini Naidu is a born poet. Her poetry displays her clear understanding of elemental life. Owing to her preoccupation with the themes of life, love, fate, death, nature, etc., her literary output is of perennial charm and universal significance. Technically, though not an innovator, her competence cannot be ignored. Every inch an Indian in themes, imagery and expression, her poetic excellence is undoubtedly commendable. What is particularly remarkable about her is her exquisite lyricism, Indianness, elemental simplicity of thought and expression and, above all, her shrill voice of joy and hope. Though she cannot emulate Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo in depth and breadth of thought-contents and in maturity and variety of poetic technique, she is certainly a major, significant poetic voice in Indian English poetry. Inevitably, she reminds us of Shelley's beautiful lines about Keat's immortality as a poet:

' ... till the Future dares

Forget the Past, his fate and fame shall be

An echo and a light unto eternity!<sup>40</sup>

## References

<sup>1</sup>Sarojini Naidu, "In Salutation to My Father's Spirit," *The Sceptred Flute* ( Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1958) , p.160.

<sup>2</sup>Sarojini Naidu, *The Golden Threshold*( London: William Heinemann, 1905) , p.14.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.15.

<sup>4</sup>Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, *Life and Myself — Dawn Approaching Noon* ( Bombay: Nalanda Publications, 1960) , p.15.

<sup>5</sup>Dedication," *The Golden Threshold*.

<sup>6</sup>Introduction to *The Bird of Time*( London: William Heinemann, 1912) , p.6.

<sup>7</sup>Introduction to *The Golden Threshold*, p.21.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p.22.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p.14.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p.22.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p.15.

<sup>12</sup>*The Sceptred Flute*, p.78.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p.148.

<sup>14</sup>"Love Omnipotent," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.228.

<sup>15</sup>"Life," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.35

<sup>16</sup>"In the Forest," *The Sceptred Flute*, pp.32-3.

<sup>17</sup>"The Salutation to the Eternal Peace," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.137.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>"Mrs. Naidu's Appeal for Unity among Peoples of Asia," *The Statesman* ( Tuesday: March 25, 1947) , p.5.

<sup>20</sup>"Wandering Singers," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.4.

<sup>21</sup>"The Soul's Prayer," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.124.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p.123.

<sup>23</sup>"Solitude," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.132.

<sup>24</sup>"The Imam Bara," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.152.

<sup>25</sup>"Imperial Delhi," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.156.

<sup>26</sup>"The Old Woman," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.126.

<sup>27</sup>"Destiny," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.201.

<sup>28</sup>"Immutable," *The Feather of the Dawn* ( Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1961) , p.34.

<sup>29</sup>"Life," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.35.

<sup>30</sup>"The Challenge to Fate," *The Sceptred Flute*, pp.134-35.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p.134.

<sup>32</sup>"Spring in Kashmir," *The Feather of the Dawn*, p.15.

<sup>33</sup>"Invincible," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.174.

<sup>34</sup>"The Prayer of Islam," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.168.

<sup>35</sup>"A Challenge to Fate," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.134.

<sup>36</sup>"Palanquin-Bearers," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.3.

<sup>37</sup>"The Paradah Nashin," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.53.

<sup>38</sup>"Cprice," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.231.

<sup>39</sup>"The Sanctuary," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.231.

<sup>40</sup>Shelley, "Adonais," *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson ( London: Oxford University Press, 1956) , p.432.

## 6

## Challenge to Fate in Sarojini Naidu's Poetry

In a land where most of the people have always believed in fatalism and have usually a tendency to submit to Fate accepting its supremacy over human life, one feels to pause and ponder over Sarojini Naidu's poetry when one finds her frequently challenging Fate. Exceptionally dauntless, vigorous and steadfast as she was, she, despite her constant ill health, refused to bow down before the freakishness and waywardness of mighty Fate, commonly defined as the "power looked upon as controlling all events in a way that cannot be resisted."<sup>1</sup> In fact, her bold defiance of Destiny reveals in her a unique human being, and she reminds us of, and, of course, emulates, in a way, the great, inimitable legendary Savitri of ancient India. She shows remarkable courage and determination to challenge Fate, and her stress on the qualities of immense tolerance and strength to meet danger and disaster invests her poetry with a rare meaning and grace. As the defiance of Fate is a recurrent note of her poetry and is doubtless an integral part of her poetic vision, it is worthwhile to study it in some detail.

Sarojini Naidu is fully aware of the havoc that Destiny inflicts upon human life, and of the human efforts ending in smoke because of its strange ways. In the poem, "A Challenge to Fate," she elaborates some of the ravages with which Fate fondly endeavours to crush human beings:

You may perchance wreck in your bitter malice  
The radiant empire of mine eager eyes....

... ..  
... ..

You may usurp the kingdoms of my hearing

... ..  
... ..

Yea, you may smite my mouth to throbbing silence,  
Pluck from my lips power of articulate words....

... ..

... ..  
Yea, you may quell my blood with sudden anguish,  
Fetter my limbs with some compelling pain....

... ..  
... ..

Tho' you deny the hope of all my being,  
Betray my love, my sweetest dream destroy,<sup>2</sup>

An indifferent "dragon-fly"<sup>3</sup> and "black-winged"<sup>4</sup> as Sarojini Naidu calls Fate, it often deprives life of a passion-flower,<sup>5</sup> shatters the ivory tower of dreams and tortures people by overwhelming them with fear and hate.<sup>6</sup>

To Sarojini Naidu, the failures, setbacks, griefs, fears, etc., caused by Fate to oppress human beings, are an essential part of life, which will but be incomplete and shallow without them. Man has to evince his worth as a living being by passing through these trials and tribulations. In the poem, "Life," the poetess tells her children that they cannot grasp the essence of human existence unless they face and taste the fears, failures, sorrows, struggles, etc. with which life is fraught owing to the fickleness of cruel Fate:

Till ye have battled with great grief and fears,  
And borne the conflict of dream-shattering years,  
Wounded with fierce desire and worn with strife,  
Children, ye have not lived; for this is life.<sup>7</sup>

Sarojini Naidu's courageous spirit disregards all sufferings and pains, mental as well as physical, since the poetess considers them as the very essence of life. According to her, life is immensely enriched by sufferings and pains. Joys and sorrows are inalienable and do not have separate entities, for they are only two sides of the one and the only reality.

However, Sarojini Naidu does not conceive of Fate as merely a motiveless, blind force leading man to a bad end alone; it is much more than that, as there is another profile of it, too. Life is not just "a homeless bird"<sup>8</sup> engulfed in lampless woe.<sup>9</sup> Sarojini Naidu is able to perceive, though not often, the truth that Fate is not exclusively associated with defeat, devastation and death; it sometimes enables man to achieve easily or unexpectedly vic-

tory, honour and renown also. Little wonder she sees the stars as gems of Fate, and in the sweet lyric, "Immutable," she writes:

And the stars inscribe your glory  
In lyric and legend of fame.<sup>10</sup>

No doubt, Fate, according to Sarojini Naidu, is frequently very harsh to man and is benevolent only occasionally, but what is most characteristic of it is that it is enveloped in unknown future. It is a mystery, an uncertainty, and is as strange and unknowable as future. The poetess describes it in the poem, "Past and Future" thus:

And now the soul stands in a vague, intense  
Expectancy and anguish of suspense,  
On the dim chamber-threshold ... lo! he sees  
Like a strange, fated bride as yet unknown,  
His timid future shrinking there alone,  
Beneath her marriage-veil of mysteries.<sup>11</sup>

What makes Sarojini Naidu's poetry invaluable to the modern man, oppressed by defeats, diseases, disasters and death, is her unflinching conviction that howsoever powerful Fate may be, it cannot take away hope from human life and that the world abounds in things which amply make amends for the losses caused by Fate. In the poem entitled "A Challenge to Fate," she vociferously and vigorously tells Fate that amidst the unhappy realities of life, she can live peacefully and joyfully in the world of imagination and memory, and that even in its most fearfully torturous and destructive mood, it cannot deprive her of "scatheless spirit," "the bridal rapture," "the lyric pageant," the "surging harmonies of battling tempests and unconquered seas," the sweet tune of "the ten thousand voices of the spring," the "free far-journeying fancy," "the deep source of universal joy," "triumphant mind" and the "indomitable soul."<sup>12</sup>

Sarojini Naidu continually impresses upon our mind that Fate can overwhelm only those who suffer from weak will and spirit. The brave are endowed with courage and strength to disregard and vanquish grief, frustration and failure. Inevitably, such strong souls become one with the Universal Joy. The poetess asserts that her indomitable spirit and unbending mind cannot be weak-

ened by the frustration of hope, the failure in love and the shattering of deeply desired dreams. She knows that the cruel, malignant Fate is strong enough to nip in the bud all her dreams and aspirations, and can threaten her very existence; still, she evinces wonderful courage to challenge it to tame or crush her invincible spirit. In a loud, defiant tone, she says:

Tho' you deny the hope of all my being,  
Betray my love, my sweetest dream destroy,  
Yet will I slake my individual sorrow  
At the deep source of universal joy....  
O Fate, in vain you hanker to control  
My frail, serene, indomitable soul.<sup>13</sup>

For Sarojini Naidu, fearlessness is the weapon by which we can easily face the ravages of Fate. Fearlessness and fortitude enable man to go through the endless struggle of life and to attain the inner vision. Determination and boldness fill him with strength and inspiration to reach the goal — the goal of indivisible joy — , regardless of the varied, innumerable obstacles and failures. But for all this, man's eyes must be fixed on the great goal, for only this can endow him with strength and fearlessness. Thus the poetess proclaims in the poem entitled "The Flute Player of Brindaban":

No peril of the deep or height  
Shall daunt my winged foot;  
No fear of time-unconquered space,  
Or light untravelled route,  
Impede my heart that pants to drain  
The nectar of thy flute!<sup>14</sup>

Sarojini Naidu believes that the beauties of nature, supreme human virtues and the love of the Eternal are the inexhaustible fountains of joy and strength before which the cruelties of Fate appear meaningless to man and life becomes simply wonderful and worth living to him. Beauty, and especially the beauty of nature, is perennial and all-pervasive, right from the earth to the sky. The mystic sources of creation, manifested in the variegated forms of nature-beauty, impart man fathomless optimism. One ignores, and becomes oblivious of, the tragedies inflicted on men by Destiny, the moment one has just a glimpse of the beautiful nature.

Apropos of this unique power of nature, Sarojini Naidu writes in the poem, "Spring in Kashmir":

If spring grants us but one rich tulip for token,  
Shall we fear if on Fortune's blind wheel we are broken?<sup>15</sup>

Sarojini Naidu never fails to find immense joy and strength in nature even when she is enveloped in dark despair, loneliness and pain; indeed, she always feels the much-needed relief in the healing power of nature:

Pain-weary and dream-worn I lie awake,  
Counting like beads the blazing stars o'erhead;  
Round me the wind-stirred champak branches shake  
Blossoms that fall and break  
In perfumed rain across my lonely bed.<sup>16</sup>

In Sarojini Naidu's view, man rises above the plane of Fate's destructive activities by practising supreme human virtues like good done to others, hope, comfort and love given to the suffering humanity, purity of action and truthfulness, and performance of deeds prompted by a sense of righteousness, regardless of terrible consequences, etc. Noble thoughts and actions enable man to defy Fate's blind fury, achieve freedom from fear of it, and be absolutely undisturbed by the omnipresent, wayward Fate. In the short, beautiful lyric, "Invincible," Sarojini Naidu defies Fate and forgets the troubles, pains and sorrows heaped on her frail being by it by resorting to deliver good to the suffering millions by giving them the nectar of hope, comfort and love. She says:

O Fate, betwixt the grinding stones of Pain,  
Tho' you have crushed my life like broken grain,  
Lo! I will leaven it with my tears and knead  
The bread of Hope to comfort and to feed  
The myriad hearts for whom no harvests blow  
Save bitter herbs of woe.  
Tho' in the flame of Sorrow you have thrust  
My flowering soul and trod it into dust,  
Behold, it doth reblossom like a grove  
To shelter under quickening boughs of Love  
The myriad souls for whom no garden bloom  
Save bitter buds of doom.<sup>17</sup>

Time and again, Sarojini Naidu sets forth her conviction that

it is the belief in the Infinite that subdues the fury of Fate. Much stronger than man, Destiny continues to play with human beings by torturing them in varied ways, but it can be easily defeated with the help of the Supreme Being whose spark is always present in man. If man has faith in Him and considers Him as the ultimate reality and goal of life, he becomes an embodiment of power and all his weaknesses are turned into invincible strength. Speaking of God who is much greater than Fate, she says:

We praise Thee, O Compassionate!  
Master of Life and Time and Fate,  
... ..  
... ..  
Thou art the Goal for which we long,  
Thou art our Silence and our Song,  
Life of the sunbeam and the seed —  
... ..  
... ..  
Thou dost transmute from hour to hour  
Our mortal weakness into power,  
Our bondage into liberty,<sup>18</sup>

Since she regards the Infinite as the supreme governing power of the universe that rules over Fate too, she submits herself completely to Him and declares:

His vital hands command and keep  
The issues of my Fate.<sup>19</sup>

God is much greater than Fate. It is He Who preserves life against the onslaught of Destiny, and fills man with life-sustaining joy that keeps him alive in the midst of fear, hatred, loneliness and tortures caused by Fate in its ferocious moods. The following lines from the poem, "In Salutation to the Eternal Peace," eloquently express Sarojini Naidu's views in this regard:

Men say the world is full of fear and hate,  
And all life's ripening harvest-fields await  
The restless sickle of relentless fate.  
... ..  
... ..  
Say, shall I heed dull presages of doom,  
Or dread the rumoured loneliness and gloom,  
The mute and mythic terror of the tomb?

For my glad heart is drunk and drenched with thee,  
 O inmost wine of living ecstasy!  
 O intimate essence of eternity!<sup>20</sup>

Apparently, the poetry of Sarojini Naidu embodies her bold defiance of Fate. Eternal joy can be experienced only by those who have strength and courage to defeat the nasty, deceptive designs of Fate. In the poem, "The Bird of Time," the poetess asks the bird about the sources of its profound joy and delightful music. The following brief extract from the answer of the bird is deeply meaningful, as it points to the precious possession emanating from the triumph over Fate:

In the dawn that thrills to a mother's prayer,  
 And the night that shelters a heart's despair  
 In the sigh of pity, the sob of hate.  
 And the pride of a soul that has conquered fate.<sup>21</sup>

The desire to escape from the hard realities of life does not touch the valient souls that aspire to defy and defeat Fate; they learn to pass through easily the moments of failure and frustration and to extract peace and joy from them. Sarojini herself lived a life of this type. She continually suffered from ill health and gloom and often longed for peace and poise, but soon her indomitable spirit would come out of such a state of despondency triumphantly and she would rush to the joyful realm of dreams and hope:

Quick with the sense of joys she hath foregone,  
 Returned my soul to beckoning joys that wait,  
 ... ..  
 ... ..  
 Winged dreams that blow their golden clarion,  
 And hope that conquers immemorial hate.<sup>22</sup>

Sarojini Naidu repeatedly points to the futile attempts of Fate to crush the glory and greatness of human life, and to the ultimate victory of noble men over relentless Fate. In the beautiful poem, "The Royal Tombs of Golconda," the poetess presents forcefully and poetically her ideas in this regard. The concluding lines of the poem are specially remarkable in this context, as they incarnate Sarojini's belief that Fate cannot destroy the imperishable in man:

O Queens, in vain old Fate decreed

Your flower-like bodies to the tomb;  
 Death is in truth the vital seed  
 Of your imperishable bloom.  
 Each new-born year the bulbuls sing  
 Their songs of your renascent loves;  
 Your beauty wakens with the spring  
 To kindle these pomegranate groves.<sup>23</sup>

To conclude, Sarojini Naidu is endowed with a serious and profound poetic vision, and as such is deeply concerned with the mysteries of Fate and Eternity. The eternal mysteries of the universe lend her strength to face the cruelties of relentless Fate that completely fails to tame her spirit. Her 'scatheless spirit' continually challenges Fate, and has the courage to call it foolish and say to it in loud, bold voice:

Why will you strive with me, O foolish Fate?  
 You cannot break me with your poignant envy,  
 You cannot slay me with your subtle hate:  
 For all the cruel folly you pursue  
 I will not cry with suppliant hands to you.<sup>24</sup>

A courageous man, howsoever broken and worn out because of the incessant struggle against Fate he may be, is fully capable of facing successfully all the storms of miseries and misfortunes, for he has the 'intimate essence of eternity.' In fact, Sarojini Naidu's poetry reveals her impenetrable faith in the superiority of divinity over doom, of life over death. It is with this conviction that she defies Fate and sings of the glories of life. In a word, she is never prepared to believe that Fate can overpower man completely, and that it, with all its might and malignancy, can ever reduce the refulgent, resplendent life to naught.

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<sup>2</sup> Sarojini Naidu, *The Sceptred Flute*( Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1958) , pp.134-35.  
<sup>3</sup> "Destiny," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.201.  
<sup>4</sup> Sarojini Naidu, "Immutable," *The Feather of the Dawn*( Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1961) , p.34.

- <sup>5</sup>"Destiny," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.35.  
<sup>6</sup>"Immutable," *The Feather of the Dawn*, p.161.  
<sup>7</sup>*The Sceptred Flute*, p.35.  
<sup>8</sup>"The Flute Player of Brindaban," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.161.  
<sup>9</sup>Ibid.  
<sup>10</sup>*The Feather of the Dawn*, p.34.  
<sup>11</sup>*The Sceptred Flute*, p.34.  
<sup>12</sup>"A Challenge to Fate," *The Sceptred Flute*, pp.134-35.  
<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p.134.  
<sup>14</sup>*The Sceptred Flute*, p.162.  
<sup>15</sup>*The Feather of the Dawn*, p.15.  
<sup>16</sup>"The Garden Vigil," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.172.  
<sup>17</sup>"Invincible," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.174.  
<sup>18</sup>"The Prayer of Islam," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.168.  
<sup>19</sup>"A Persian Lute Song," *The Feather of the Dawn*, p.11.  
<sup>20</sup>*The Sceptred Flute*, p.137.  
<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p.65.  
<sup>22</sup>"At Twilight," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.78.  
<sup>23</sup>"The Royal Tombs of Golconda," *The Sceptred Flute*, pp.59-60.  
<sup>24</sup>"A Challenge to Fate," *The Sceptred Flute*, p.134.

## 7

## The Waning Reputation of Thomas Carlyle

More than Doctor Johnson in the eighteenth century, Wordsworth in the Romantic Period, or T.S. Eliot in the present times did Thomas Carlyle — philosopher, historian, explorer of German literature and thought, literary critic, biographer, and the writer of the introspective *Sartor Resartus* and of political pamphlets — form the nucleus of the literary scene in the Victorian era. There was hardly any literary form which did not bear the stamp of his genius. The first and foremost among the great Victorian prophets, he exerted tremendous influence on intellectuals and writers entirely different from him and from one another: on thinkers like Stuart Mill, on novelists like Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Meredith, Trollope, Charles Reade and Kingsley; on poets like Tennyson, Browning, Arnold and William Morris; and on aesthetes and prose writers like Ruskin, Pater and Newman. And yet this most distinguished and influential thinker and man of letters of the Victorian age did not enjoy much popularity just after twenty years of his death at the beginning of the present century; as a matter of fact, his fame and influence began to wane consistently immediately after his death in February, 1881. Not only this, even during the last ten years of his life, there was a clear-cut decline in his powers and influence which is evident from the fact that while almost all the major writers of the early Victorian age came under his sweeping influence in varying degrees and at various times, some of the great later Victorians like the versatile Hardy and the unconventional Samuel Butler did not evince the impact of his ideas and attitudes. Carlyle's writings were read quite widely during the early decades of the twentieth century and figured in the syllabi of many universities where English literature was studied. But by and by interest in him began to decrease and now he is no more as popular among the students, teachers, scholars and researchers as he used to

be once upon a time. In a word, there has certainly occurred a steep fall in his reputation as a thinker as well as a writer. The present paper is a modest attempt to examine the basic weaknesses in his aims, ideas and art which are responsible for the decline in his fame, and which will, in my opinion, always hamper the process of any genuine world-wide revival of interest in his writings.

About literary reputation, in general, and the reputation of the nineteenth-century writers, in particular, Lord David Cecil has something very significant to say, and it is worthwhile to quote him here, for it is very relevant in the context of Carlyle's present reputation as a writer:

But no author's reputation is certain for fifty years at least after his death....

... ..  
 ... ..  
 ... ..

.... But by some mysterious law of human taste it is almost impossible to enter into the spirit of the age that comes just before one's own. The clothes in the pictures of one's great-grandmother in youth, look charming and picturesque; those in pictures of one's mother look merely grotesque; so grotesque, indeed, that it is impossible to discriminate between them. And similarly the mental fashions of the last generation seem so absurd to the next one that it cannot estimate their comparative merits at all. Pope could not admire any Caroline, the Romantics could not admire Pope, and the Edwardians could not admire the Victorians. It was not that they disagreed with their ideals more than with those of other ages. They complained a great deal, it is true, of the Victorian ideal of domesticity; but they did not disapprove of it any more than they did of the Elizabethan ideal of virginity. And this they never complained of at all. Critics rebuked Tennyson for representing Lancelot as an English gentleman of 1860, but were only interested when Shakespeare represented Troilus as an English gentleman of 1590. The last age, like a relation, is too close for a man to be able to view it with the detachment necessary for criticism....

Any way, inevitable reactions have their inevitable ends. After a few years a period passes from shadow into the sunless impartial daylight of history, its books to be surveyed in perspective with the rest of literature, to be judged as personally or as little personally as those of the Greeks and Hebrews. That which has permanent value emerges, that which only appealed to a transitory phase of taste is finally obscured.<sup>1</sup>

Now though one hundred and twenty years have elapsed since Carlyle died, yet there does not seem any real revival of

great interest in him. While Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Hardy, Tennyson, Browning and Arnold have come into great prominence again and are ranked among the greatest writers of all times, Carlyle, who shaped their creative genius considerably and was much more popular than any of them, is not given even one tenth of the importance he gained in his life time. Perhaps the prophetic observation of George Eliot about his future literary reputation has gone completely wrong, or we may discern an underlying meaning in her prophecy, that is, her concealed and garbed doubts about his actual worth and the lasting value of his writings:

It is an idle question to ask whether his books will be read a century hence: if they were all burnt as the grandest of Suttees on his funeral pile, it would be only like cutting down an oak after its acorns have sown a forest. For there is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle's writings; there has hardly been an English book written for the last ten or twelve years that would not have been different if Carlyle had not lived.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, now Carlyle mainly lives because of his influence on the great victorians, and not so much because of his writings.

My observation may appear unfair, but I sincerely feel, after closely perusing some of the remarks of Carlyle's contemporaries and followers about him, that perhaps it was because of Carlyle's powerful and eloquent expression of his idiosyncratic ideas and dissident voice against the ills and evils of his age that many of his contemporaries were overawed and swept away by him, thus often agreeing with his views and preachings. In support of my assertion I quote a few lines from the *Autobiography* of Trollope who avowed himself a follower of Carlyle and even now is considered so:

The writer of stories must please, or he will be nothing. And he must teach whether he wishes to teach or not. How shall he teach lessons of virtue and at the same time make himself a delight to his readers?... But the novelist, if he has a conscience, must preach his sermons with the same purpose as the clergyman, and must have his own system of ethics. If he can do this efficiently, if he can make virtue alluring and vice ugly, while he charms his readers instead of wearying them, then I think Mr. Carlyle need not call him distressed....<sup>3</sup>

A careful scrutiny of these lines, especially of the closing part of the last sentences evidences Trollope's in agreeing with Carlyle and his latent dissatisfaction with Carlyle's eccentric views on literature and its inalienable relation with preaching.

In fact, Carlyle's great influence and reputation in his age were not only due to his writings which exist to-day and the ideas which they contain, but also due to the man that he was — that is, due to the noble, chaste, honest and virtuous life that he led, due to the earnest and persuasive tone, force, eloquence and confidence with which he would express his ideas, due to his sincere desire and endeavour to sympathise and uplift the suffering humanity, and due to the fact that public lectures and lively conversation and discussions at the great writer's in the evening once a week were in vogue and great fashion in the Victorian age. Here I quote George Eliot to illustrate how Carlyle's contemporaries were mainly influenced by the wonderful man in him, and not by his thought as such:

It is not as a theorist, but as a great and beautiful human nature, that Carlyle influences us. You may meet a man whose wisdom seems unimpeachable, since you find him entirely in agreement with yourself; but this oracular man of unexceptionable opinions has a green eye, a wiry hand, and altogether a wesen, or demeanour, that makes the world look blank to you, and whose unexceptionable opinions become a bore; while another man who deals in what you cannot but think 'dangerous paradoxes,' warms your heart by the pressure of his hand, and looks out on the world with so clear and loving an eye, that nature seems to reflect the light of his glance upon your own feeling. So it is with Carlyle. When he is saying the very opposite of what we think, he says it so finely, with so hearty conviction — he makes the object about which we differ stand out in such grand relief under the clear light of his strong and honest intellect — he appeals so constantly to our sense of the manly and truthful — that we are obliged to say 'Hear! hear!' to the writer before we can give the decorous 'Oh! oh!' to his opinions.<sup>4</sup>

In the passage, quoted above, George Eliot, by implication, says that as a theorist or philosopher, Carlyle is not sound and great. But we are not concerned with this point here; I will discuss it later on. What I want to stress here is that Carlyle was popular and great because people found in him an inspired and inspiring teacher, preacher, prophet, guide and guardian. In short, Carlyle

had a magnetic personality which made him the greatest literary force of his age, and naturally with his passing away in 1881, much of his literary fame also vanished.

One very patent cause of Carlyle's waning reputation is that he mostly spoke and wrote on topical subjects, and hence he is hackneyed and outdated now. He was averse to industrial growth, democracy, scientific progress, materialism, faith and morality, and was the champion of hero and hero-worship — that is, perhaps dictatorship. These days most of his views on these subjects appear a bit absurd and are usually unacceptable. True, all his life he was deeply engrossed in the questions of his age, and so, as Robertson rightly holds, "Now a days, when the interest in many of these questions has ceased to be a burning one, when a tolerance, not far removed from indifference, had invaded all fields of mental and moral speculation, and when a calmer historical contemplation of human evolution has taken the place of the embittered controversy of Victorian days, Carlyle's power over man's mind is, necessarily, no longer what it was."<sup>5</sup>

It is commonly believed that Carlyle dominated the mid-nineteenth century chiefly because of two reasons.<sup>6</sup> First, whatever his topic, his eye was on the present, wholly or partly. It had been Hazlitt's view and it became Carlyle's that the moral justification for learning about the past lay in its relevance to the problematic present. The historian of Cromwell and the rest went so far as to say that a past century was "worthless, except precisely in so far as it can be made the nineteenth."<sup>7</sup> Carlyle voiced his contempt for the "reading-corps, who read merely to escape from themselves."<sup>8</sup> Again, he vociferously declared: "I do believe for onething, a man has no right to say to his own generation, turning quite away from it, 'Be damned.'<sup>9</sup> His first concern was with his living fellows, as he avers: "My heart is sick and sore on behalf of my own poor generation."<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, Carlyle fully comprehended his age and remained faithful to it for its own sake and because he was unusually gifted to deal with it. In two comparatively early essays, "Signs of the Times" (1829) and "Characteristics" (1831), he gave a purposeful

complete account of the present. Because of those essays, and the knowledge and insight they represented, he was the spokesman of what Hazlitt called the spirit of the age, which Carlyle preferred to call the *Zeitgeist*, which was much discussed and which Buckle summarized as the “pressure of surrounding opinions.” Carlyle was always deeply engaged in modifying the *Zeitgeist* as much as in responding to it.

But even here, that is, in these two factors which are generally thought to be greatly responsible for his immense popularity in his age, I see a contradiction and feel that there was something wrong with Carlyle. It is, indeed, surprising that Carlyle cared so much for a present which he never ceased to stigmatize in phrases like ‘these our afflicted times,’ ‘this dislocated time,’ ‘these anarchic times,’ ‘these quite unmusical days,’ ‘the most distracted and divided age,’ ‘our poor nineteenth century,’ ‘our poor, jarring, self-listening time,’ ‘this sad age of cobwebs, worn-out symbolism, reminiscences and simulacra,’ ‘these unspeakable days’ or in the phrase Arnold borrowed for his well-known sonnet ‘these bad days.’ Perhaps the reason why he was so much concerned with his age, which looked ‘out of joints’ to him, was that just because the age was all he said, it was that he could not forsake.

As for Carlyle’s clear, complete grasp of the spirit of his age, and his being its authentic spokesman, any scholar of the Victorian age can easily perceive the fact that Carlyle did not voice that spirit wholly. For all its apparent amplitude and up-to-datedness, his philosophy is clearly marked by omissions and parochial corners. He grossly misjudged the discoveries of mid-nineteenth century scientists, though he could acquire good sound knowledge of science and attain eminence in Mathematics in 1920’s. And this disqualified him from participating in the geological controversy which was upsetting people’s trust in Genesis as a historical record, and later from considering what Huxley called the most significant question for the nineteenth century — ‘man’s place in nature.’ Nor did he join his middle-class contemporaries in poring over the appearance of rocks, stones and trees, of clouds

and waves, an occupation that accounted for perhaps a quarter of the matter of mid-nineteenth century literature. He did encourage his fellows to see, and to see for themselves, but to see what was being seen by him, and even Ruskin, his admirer and follower, was not an exception to it. Again, Carlyle missed the first firm moves towards the emancipation of women, to which his disciple, John Stuart Mill, was so alive. The world of Carlyle’s writings seems to be totally, aggressively and primitively a male world. In addition, he lagged behind his age in the ‘moral sensibility’ claimed for it by David Masson who noted also its inevitable lack of ‘moral vigour.’ The reason is that Carlyle had too plain (perhaps because he was too Scottish) an idea of moral right and wrong, and some of his menacing confidence was due to that plainness. In support of my assertion, I quote a few lines from *Thomas Carlyle, Table Talk* by Walter Lewin:

Tolerance and a rose-water world is the evil symptom of the time we are living in: it was just like it before the French Revolution, when universal brotherhood, tolerance and twaddle were preached in all the market places; so they had to go through their revolution with one hundred and fifty a day butchered — the gutters thick with blood, and the skins tanned into leather: and so it will be here unless a righteous intolerance of the Devil should awake in time.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, if Carlyle cannot be said to be up-to-date at all points, he cannot be considered wholly sound in what he did try to master. As Robert Buchaman says: “Carlyle — a poet in his savage way — has driven some new and splendid truths (and as many errors into the heart of the people.”<sup>12</sup> ‘Dubious metal’ is often found existing in his ideas. Also, his recommendation of hero-worship is not free from great dangers. However, with all his limitations and dubious assertions, Carlyle in the 1830’s and 1840’s was nearly abreast of his age as no other writer was, but by the eighteen seventies his comments began to seem a little old-fashioned, though he was still very deeply engrossed in the burning questions of his times.

Another reason of the waning reputation of Carlyle is that his aim in life, as he himself proclaimed, was to be a teacher and a prophet to his own age. In fact, he wanted neither to be a critic of literature nor a historian. With every new book his writing was

becoming more actual in its aims; the past was becoming more and more a medium through which he spoke to the present. Obviously, he had great appeal for his age and was held in high esteem in his life time. But with his passing away and with the passing away of his times, his reputation and influence also became a thing of the past. It was on account of his definite intention of playing the role of a teacher and a prophet to his age that he had peculiar nations of literature and history. To him literature was never merely literature; its value as an aesthetic expression had always been subordinate to its potentiality as an intellectual and moral force. Great poetry for him was not the embodiment of the highest beauty, but the repository of the deepest lessons for humanity. Likewise, history, according to him, was not merely a record of how things had been, but also a writing on the walls for the benefit of the historian's contemporaries. Carlyle did not write history as mere scholar or even as mere historian, but as a moralist. His books on French Revolution, Cromwell and Frederick the Great show him extracting moral meanings from history. As a matter of fact, he twisted, distorted and adapted things to suit his intentions and aims, to his ideals and attitudes. A short survey of his major works will clearly illustrate this point. His idiosyncrasy is apparent in all his writings, and this makes his books faulty in contents, and quite often unsatisfactory to the modern reader, See *The French Revolution*: it is essentially a personal confession. He himself proclaimed: "You have not had for two hundred years any book that came more truly from a man's heart." The book is a declaration of its author's convictions on problems of his own time; a solemn warning to the England of his own days to avoid a catastrophe which Carlyle believed was imminent. Patently, he coloured history by his personally and ideas.

Due to Carlyle's immeasurable respect and honour for man and manliness, we feel sorry to see him committing blunders in his biographies. Let us illustrate it from *Frederick the Great*. Carlyle reaches that point in his vast biography at which he has to record and weigh Frederick's flight from the battle of Mollwitz,

which unexpectedly ended in a big victory. That was a bad moment in the life of Frederick, and his biographer should have admitted it. But he praised him for it. In quest of men great enough to worship, Carlyle wished to worship them whole. To pinpoint weakness in Frederick was like alleging and betraying him.

Carlyle's political writings are often faulty and unpleasant to the twentieth-century reader. His politic thoughts, though aiming at radical change, were aristocratic. The scathing attacks he made on the idea of democracy in *Latter-Days Pamphlets*, "Shooting Magara" and *Frederick the Great* are rather appalling to the modern man. His love of man often took the form of explosive hatred. He commented on the census of 1841 thus: "Twenty seven millions mostly fools."<sup>13</sup> His understanding of the complexities of most of the electoral issues led him to deride the principle of 'one man one vote.' And in his later life he put a dash after repeating the catchword "Manhood suffrage," following it with "househood, doghood ditto, not yet treated of."<sup>14</sup> His views on negroes were a century older. He described them as grinning, nimble, useful animals, and expressed his contempt for their mental powers in the title of an essay he published in *Fraser's* in 1849, and later reprinted it as a pamphlet entitled *The Nigger Question*. He also invited fury in 1866 when he justified the brutal treatment accorded to them by Governor Eyre when they rioted in Jamaica.

As a literary critic Carlyle evinces little originality, and is not free from glaring blemishes. In his concepts of the poet as priest and literature as a branch of religion, Carlyle reproduced Fichte. He acknowledged his indebtedness to Fichte in "Jesuitism." Carlyle cannot but be vehemently criticized for his faulty critical sense when he clearly prefers prose to poetry. His advice to Sterling was to be "steady against poetry."<sup>15</sup> Browning's 'Transcendentalism' ( "Stop playing, Poet! May a brother speak?") is perhaps his comment on a passage in "The Hero as Poet." Needless to say, Carlyle in his prose is not usually plain and clear. He expresses himself in a very complex manner which I shall discuss a little later in this paper.

We notice an unhappy contradiction in Carlyle's approach to

fiction. Though an idealist and the pioneer of the idealistic reaction of the mid-nineteenth century, he repeatedly told the novelists of his age that if they insisted on writing fiction, they must concentrate on 'truth' — that is, concrete typical human stuff undergoing the experience that normally comes its way. Evidently, he had no sympathy with the idealist school of fiction. This exerted a pernicious impact on the Victorian novelists, and some of them took Carlyle's advice literally and practised actual reporting. Henry Kingsley worked on a Glasgow newspaper. While writing novels, the authors tended to draw on their own experiences. Novels about the present and its troubles, like *Hard Times* and *Beauchamp's Career*, were written and were much admired. Unfortunately, the novelists wasted a lot of their energy and time in making their fiction as accurate as Carlyle's own histories. An injurious consequence of his influence on fiction was that the absence of Carlylean 'purpose' in a novel was often regarded as a blemish. Thus, reviewing *Pendennis* and *David Copperfield* ( which are now doubtless considered as two great works of the Victorian age) in *The North British Review* of 1815, Masson saw Thackeray as no reformer, but "far gone in a kind of grim, courteous prococurantism."

Carlyle is essentially a romantic critic, taking his method from the two leaders of German romanticism, Schlegel brothers; but he adapted the German's approach to criticism to his own needs, and sometimes very faultily applied it to the writers on whom he wrote. Carlyle's method is summed up in the title of one of his early essays, "Characteristics," a title which had been used for a volume of criticism by the two German brothers. He adapted the interpretative method of Schlegels to English needs. In practice, criticism of this kind is liable to suffer from serious flaws, and it becomes quite faulty when it is used by a person of strong likes and dislikes such as Carlyle. This critical method is at the mercy of the personal attitude of the critic to literature; it allows freer play to subjective likes and dislikes than is permitted to the critic who should follow certain established norms. In other words, it is based on an original sympathy between the critic and the

author on whom he writes. Naturally, Carlyle was at his best and wrote masterly when he could have strong sympathy with the writers like his German masters, Goethe, Jean Paul, Novalis and the English poet Burns. But when he did not have original sympathy with a writer, he wrote monstrously. This is evident in his comments on men like Heine, on the leaders of the French romantic school and on many of his English contemporaries, such as Coleridge, Wordsworth and Lamb. He was abominably prejudiced against French literature, and always underrated the good that it had done to England, seeing in it little more than 'wretched mockeries about marriage' and 'Canine libertinage.' In a letter written to John Forster in 1844, he again nastily observed: "The French literature of G. Sand & Co., which many people told me was a new-birth, I found to be a detestable putrefaction — new life of nothing but maggots and blue bottles." He even railed at the French for "ever talking, ever gesticulating," forgetting that the words applied to him as well.

Lastly, I would like to say a few things about Carlyle's prose-style which I consider one of the chief causes of his waning reputation. By 1841, *Fraser's*, which had serialized *Sartor Resartus* in 1833-34, was referring to 'Carlyleism' as a manner of writing, and by 1858 at least came into existence the term 'Carlylese.' Even his admirer, Arnold indirectly attacked his grotesque and impure style. Defending the impurity of style and accounting for it, Carlyle wrote to Sterling on June 4, 1835: "Do you reckon this really a time for Purism of style;... I do not: with whole ragged battalions of Scott's Novel-Scotch, with Irish, German, French and even Newspaper cockney ... storming in on us, and the whole structure of our Johnsonian English breaking up from its foundations — revolution there is as visible as anywhere else."<sup>16</sup> Carlylese is a fantastic blend of neologisms, nicknames and compound words, and its elaborate metaphors mingled with homely colloquial phrases. It is very difficult because of the unlicensed, erratic use of compound words and the strange inverted sentence-structure. All that Carlyle has written is, in the words of David Daiches, marked by a highly indiosyncratic, insistent, teasing, rubbing-

the-reader's-nose- in it-style.<sup>17</sup> Even though Carlylese had been anticipated in the eighteenth century by the elaborateness of Burke and the abruptness of Sterne and Macpherson, Carlyle drew the inspiration from German literature, specially from Jean Paul Richter.

Carlyle's style is teasing, idiosyncratic and complex because of numerous peculiarities. Some of his italics are very striking by being confined to a part of a word, as in '*invisible*' and '*misseen*' 'in' and 'seen' are italicized respectively. These words, being negatives, point to something deep in his mind — his inability, when thinking, to state a positive without also stating its negative, as if by mirror-image. This idiosyncrasy is largely due to the sharp division he insists on seeing between right and wrong.

Carlyle expresses the antithesis in almost all his sentences by exploiting the various ways of forming negatives. He sometimes reserves his negative for the closing part of a sentence. I quote a few lines as sample from *Past and Present*: "The sum of it, visible in every street, market-place, senate-house, circulating-library, cathedral, cotton-mill, and union-workhouse, fills one *not* with a comic feeling!"<sup>18</sup> Dissatisfied with doubling the number of adjective by supplying them all with an 'un' —, he sometimes adds that prefix to a noun; small wonder we see him using 'laws' and 'unlaws', 'workers' and 'unworkers,' 'friends' and 'unfriends,' etc.

Then there are more oddities in Carlyle's diction — things like "hebetude and cecity," "indolences and esuriences"<sup>20</sup>; long-discarded expressions like 'beautifuler', 'beautifullest,' 'doabler' and 'fataler'; Teutonic compounds like the 'snow-and-rosebloom maiden' which Sterling found 'uncouth,' or the 'love-deeps' that made Swinburne shudder; and the 'choking double-words' that Thackeray disliked in his *Times* review of *French Revolution*. All this cumbrousness and chokingness is deliberate, and his style is adversely affected by the use of frequent inversions too. For instance, he writes: "A cheap worship in Paraguay, according to the humour of the people, Francia left...." Also, there are frequent contortions which Swinburne ridiculed. Sometimes to start a sentences Carlyle uses unnecessarily several adjectives; for instance, "Grand, surely, harmoniously built together, far-seeing, wise and

true."

All these characteristics of Carlyle's prose style are so noticeable that even in Victorian age it was much debated. George Eliot remarked that he hurled his 'verbal missiles' as Milton's angels hurled rocks. Carlyle was seen as the first and largest of the spasmodics ( a term he himself used to characterize Byron) and hence was attacked vehemently in Aytoun's *Firmilian* for "dislocating language." No wonder Harriet Martineau called him in 1855 "the greatest mannerist of the age."

The evil effects of Carlylese are easily seen on his contemporaries. For example, in Browning's "Misconceptions" the familiar diction is affected by the word 'dalmatic' ( which means a rich garment) , which was not odd for Browning because Carlyle had used it in *Past and Present*. Another odd expression of Browning — 'extinguish the man' — is explained by the phrase being Carlyle's. Arnold's 'ground-tone' in the Obermann poems and his 'brother-world' were an imitation of Carlyle's use of them in "Corn-Law Rhymes" and *Past and Present*; and his 'far-shining' in "Rugby Chapel" can be seen in Carlyle's *Life of John Sterling*. Pater used in his essay, "Style", the odd word, "surplusage" which Carlyle had taken from legal usage and used it in "The Hero as Poet."

In short, all these oddities, complexities and mannerisms of Carlyle's style make his works very difficult and quite often almost unreadable. This kind of style and his other weaknesses, discussed above, are, in my opinion, responsible for his waning reputation, though he may be relevant to our times latently and may be regarded by some as a force to be reckoned with.

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<sup>18</sup>Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*( The World's Classics; London: Oxford University Press, 1957) , p.149.

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## 8

### Bihari's Philosophy of Life

A creative artist's life and works are inevitably shaped by the age in which he lives and creates as well as by his personal life. Accordingly, the literature of a great writer is an exquisite artistic expression of the main tendencies of his age and his personal vision of life. Bihari, one of the celebrated literary luminaries of Riti-kala — the later Medieval period in Hindi literature which preceded the Modern age — is not an exception to it; his small corpus of poetic output, viz. just seven hundred and thirteen couplets, reflect the spirit of his age, not in fragments, but completely, and at the same time embody his definite philosophy of life, though, of course, not coherently and consciously like Tulsidasa's *Ramcaritmanasa* or Suradasa's *Surasagara*. Despite the fact that the age Riti-kala in which Bihari lived did not give the poet sufficient freedom to evolve, enunciate and express his own philosophy of life, he, being a poetic genius, transcended, to a considerable extent, the bounds of his times, contemplated on some of the facets of life and poured his views into his couplets.

In Bihari's age, the poets could not fully and explicitly express their ideas about life, since poetry was written, not for the sake of self-expression and self-pleasure, but for the pleasure of the poet's patron. Usually, the inspiring force behind the poetry of this age was not the artist's deep creative urge or the dictum 'Art for the Sake of Art,' but 'Art for the Sake of Bread.' The court-poets of this period ( and most of the major poets of this age, including Bihari, were court-poets) had to compose poetry in order to provide pleasure and entertainment to the kings and feudal lords, and at the same time they had to keep in view the typical contemporary political situations with their variegated restrictions and expectations. Instead of the inner compulsions to express themselves spontaneously, they were constrained to attach all importance to epigrammatic poetry, for their patrons were not

genuine lovers of poetry and their literary understanding and interests were concerned only with the current literary fashions. Moreover, these poets, as Visvanath Prasad Misra observes, had to compete with the Indo-Persian poets who were extremely fond of epigrams, and hence they had to create epigrammatic poetry.<sup>1</sup> As Bihari was a court-poet like many others of that period, his poetry was more concerned with the external life than with the personal, inner life. He was obsessed with the popular, traditional fashions of his age such as the study of the different categories and sub-categories of female characters, figures of speech, the conventional descriptions of seasons, etc. Nevertheless, like every true poet, his ideas and attitudes found expression, in one way or another, in his couplets. Apparently, a close and careful study of his poetry brings out his definite philosophy of life, the principal ingredients of which are: respect for urbanity and aristocracy; love as the central instinct of man; faith in God, fatalism, devotion, and the uses of the company of good people; trust in the basic values of life like endurance, humility, self-respect, simplicity and the rejection of greed, servility, pride, insolence, etc; man's quest for felicity in life; stress on propriety of conduct; man's utilitarian attitude as a reality of life; belief in the sterling qualities and abilities of man as his real strength and optimism.

Riti-kala — the later Medieval Age — is indubitably regarded as a unique period in the history of Hindi literature. By that time, the mighty, multifarious stream of devotional poetry of early Medieval Age had grown weak and slender, and human life was primarily dominated by the decadent ways of feudal life. As a matter of fact, the feudal view of life had completely seized man's mind and consciousness. The society of this age had begun to be divided into two absolutely different classes of people — the exploiters and the exploited. Sex-enjoyment was getting prominence in the decaying values of life. The feudal attitude towards culture, refinement and ethos had upset the order in most of the walks of life. Lesser things of life had assumed importance in place of the warmth and joys of human relationships. There was a fast-growing aversion to diligence and industry in life. In fact,

the entire society was permeated by a shocking indifference to human values — mirrored at varied levels in the literature of that age.

Bihari's unflinching faith in the feudal style of life forms the basis of his philosophy of life. He looks at the aristocratic culture with utmost reverence. He evinces a glaring repugnance for the rural ways of life and emphasizes the importance of urban life. The reason why he looks down on the rustics is that they, according to him, are not connoisseurs, and are unable to comprehend the subtleties of life. Bihari gives vent to his belief in man's competence for proper discrimination by satirizing the perfumer's attempts to sell his stuff in the rural areas. Again, he expresses a similar conviction by ridiculing the absence of taste and refinement in the villagers to appreciate and understand the worth of a rose.

At times Bihari becomes even harsh towards to village folk. His contempt for the common man is, indeed, by implication, the expression of his acceptance of the feudal values. Since Bihari belonged to an ordinary family, it is expected that he should have sympathy for the common people. But in him, the insistence on urbanity is so strong that rural ways at every level are only a laughing-stock for him. This overemphasis on urbanity points to his rather artificial and narrow view of life.

However, Bihari's urbanity is not always confined to mere detestation for the rustics; it often evinces genuine enlightenment. He seems to be not only a sprightly, cheerful man, but also stresses the value of emotional sensibility and the capacity to comprehend the minutest aspects of beauty. Both music and poetry delight him profusely. He believes that human life is meaningless without them and hence they are absolutely essential. Blessed are those who are fully immersed in music, poetry and the sports of love. All others are really doomed!<sup>2</sup>

It is natural for an aesthete like Bihari to take strong aversion to a man devoid of taste and refinement who is not moved and delighted by music, poetry or love. Since he belongs to an erotic age, it is natural that his ideas are dominated by eroticism. True, he exhibits his unswerving belief in the dictum that one,

who does not have a genuine love for literature, music and art, is veritably an animal without tail and horns. Perhaps, this is the reason why he detests the rustics who are lacking in finer sensibilities and taste due to their hard life which is full of struggle and strife.

Bihari's glorification of sex is in consonance with the basic tendency of his age, but his views in this connection are comparatively neat and clean. It is not possible for a poet, adhering to a traditional approach to love, to ignore completely the physical, sensual side of love. And this is true of Bihari also. He paints many, varied pictures of physical love. He has written a number of couplets about the amours of separated lady-loves and crafty lovers. Amorous playfulness, physical expressions of love, poses and postures of beauty, various sports of love — all these are vividly portrayed with remarkable economy of words in his couplets. However, notwithstanding his exaggerated descriptions of varied kinds of physical love, Bihari seems to consider love as a pure and healthy human instinct. He believes that true love remains untainted even in adverse circumstances, and grows deeper and brighter with the passage of time.<sup>3</sup> In such love there is the fusion of empathy and faith in each other. It is like a piece of cloth with fast colours which may be torn in washing, but its colours, instead of fading, become brighter in every wash. The love of this kind is modest and sincere, without the least touch of exhibitionism and sensuality.

Bihari regards this type of love as true love and the basis of all human happiness. According to him, the real beauty is that which is saturated with the feeling of love. Just as oil is the source of the light of a lamp, so the essence of beauty is love. The beauty of a person loses all its significance without love which alone can add lustre to physical charms.<sup>4</sup>

Despite his numerous pictures of naked love, Bihari does not consider the fickle, changing love like that of a large black-bee as true love. In his opinion, only constant love like that of the Cakora bird is sublime in the real sense of the term. He presents the ideal fidelity in love through the symbol of fish, and

stresses that this kind of love, though excessively torturous, grows purer and intenser every moment.<sup>5</sup>

This type of love, in Bihari's view, is highly honourable and adorable. He glorifies love by comparing it with the ocean and rightly points out that even lofty-minded people get drowned in this unfathomable ocean of love. In fact, true love is absolutely different from sensuality and lust; it is an experience that transports man to the highest state of bliss of union with the Supreme Being, and not merely a physical dalliance or amorous sport.<sup>6</sup> Such a love makes one's mind and heart purer. Purity is its essence and that is why the more a man is immersed in it, the nobler he becomes. It is not just the meeting of bodies, but an experience which grows stronger as it passes through obstacles and difficulties. This love, which is a union of two minds, is not, in the least, disturbed by the distance of space and time.<sup>7</sup> It is this kind of love which, in consonance with the proper inclinations of a man, is the decisive factor of beauty or ugliness, otherwise no one is beautiful or ugly.<sup>8</sup>

Though a means of purifying the mind, the kind of love Bihari has mostly delineated in his poetry is the earthly love richly coloured with secular sentiments. Here the fascination for physical beauty is so strong that the lovers are not only divested of shyness and sense of honour, but also of the conventional rules of ethics. This love manifests itself differently in amorous activities, in the disappearance of conceit like dew drops at sunrise, in the indignation of a woman on noticing in the lover the symptoms of his meeting with some other woman, in the woman's direct invitation to the lover to sexual enjoyment, in the jealousy of the co-wife, and the overwhelming grief of the faithful woman waiting for the treacherous man, etc. This love does not enable man's personality to blossom amidst the struggles of life and attain sublime heights of character; it is only confined to various modes of sex-relationships.

Physical love cannot exist without body; yet through the bodily fulfilment it enables man to reach great heights as also the stage of self-effacement. Hence, it deserves protection from bitter

feelings and painful situations. To keep earthly love alive, sweet words and cool behaviour are essential, otherwise it may be destroyed. This is why, in spite of his belief that pangs of separation are inevitable in love, Bihari holds that it is necessary to water the creeper of love lest it should be withered by the scorching sun of indifference. Such a stream of love flows for ever. The lover's acute desire to meet is necessary to make it permanent. Obviously, love is reciprocal and demands complete mutual dedication. Even the slightest imperfection causes immense anguish and agony and mars the bliss of love.<sup>9</sup> Naturally, it must be kept free from the baser instincts like irritation, vanity, petty jealousy, etc. Such a love unifies the internal and the external being of a person and becomes explicit without being expressed. At its climax, love, even if it emanates from a desire for physical union, rises above all the social values and defies even salvation.<sup>10</sup> Generally, Bihari does not ignore the social aspects of love and although, in accordance with the temper of his age, he has described all kinds of amorous tricks and pranks of love, he has decried illicit love. No doubt, he has referred to extra-marital relations in some couplets, but illicit and immoral love is not quite acceptable to him.

Just as in worldly love, Bihari gives importance to its mental aspects, in the realm of devotion he places spontaneous attachment to the deity above all rituals. He is a worshipper of the Divine Couple —Radha and Krishna who are the true incarnations of love. He exposes the futility of the counting of rosary-beads, religious chants, pilgrimage, etc. and lays all emphasis on the purity of heart.<sup>11</sup> No doubt, for the poets of the later Medieval Age, devotion was more of a psychological support, which gave them a sort of artificial moral consolation.<sup>12</sup> Still, we do not perceive much of insincerity in Bihari when he humbly prays for the Lord's permission to lie in His court in one way or another,<sup>13</sup> or when he craves for His indulgence towards his sins,<sup>14</sup> or when he declares that the Lord alone is the saviour of mankind.<sup>15</sup> In fact, living amidst feudal values of life, Bihari feels committed to simple medieval faith. He also believes in only one God, who may

be given any name. He is not at all affected by the feelings of communal intolerance. He considers fanaticism, religious dogmatism and communalism in any form as dangerous to society.<sup>16</sup>

Devotion exerts many-sided influence on the personality of a man, and therefore Bihari attaches great importance to the company of saintly people. The poet considers the company of pious men indispensable for the enlightenment of one's soul, and does not believe in blind adherence to scriptures.<sup>17</sup> Bihari regards devotion to God as the highest values in life. His deep love for the child Krsna is the result of his simple devotional attitude. However, his poetry does not indicate his commitment to any particular devotional cult.

Bihari's beliefs are inalienable from the dominant beliefs of his age. He believes in the inevitability of sorrows in life. He affirms that man should bear sorrows, thinking they are an integral part of God's creation, and should develop an attitude of patience and fortitude.<sup>18</sup> Since God is the creator of life with all its experiences, so we must accept with utmost humility and gratitude whatever He gives — pleasure or pain.

As regards the basic values of life, Bihari, like a typical Indian, evinces faith in endurance, resignation and fate. He is conversant with the higher philosophy of life and understands the significance of lofty aims and ideals in the midst of human sufferings and failures. Man can tide over his weaknesses only slowly and gradually. If he is able to get over his weaknesses, he can emancipate himself from the strong chains of life and death and attain salvation. The fulfilment of desires gives delight to men, but their failure is a source of frustration. Wise men should, however, take them in the same spirit.

Notwithstanding his sophisticated approach to life, the poet recognises the value of simplicity and contentment as well. He is convinced that simple life with no avarice for earthly possessions can alone ensure lasting happiness; extra-indulgence in worldly desires only leads to frustration. In his view, a man, who is self-reliant and does not yield to pressures, can alone live

happily. He, who has freedom to move and live in his own way, is normally content and satisfied in life. It is quite possible that these ideas might have been provoked by the restrictions and constraints of the court life of his age.

In spite of getting royal patronage, Bihari attaches supreme significance to self-respect. He is shocked to see people trying to realise their ambitions at the cost of self-pride. Many such people, who possess commendable abilities and qualities, expose themselves to indignity and abhorrence, but they do not mind all this to achieve their selfish motives.<sup>19</sup> The poet does not approve of this tendency. A person, endowed with virtues, has a status in this world and he must not hang on others.<sup>20</sup>

It is true that Bihari sought royal patronage owing to the conditions prevalent in his age, but he never lowered himself for its sake. He eulogized King Jay Simha with utmost restraint and for only his good deeds. His utterances of praise did not amount to flattery, and he had the courage to apprise him of the reality of situations as and when necessary. His couplet, written on the King's extreme attachment for his newly wedded young bride, is well-known and oft-quoted.<sup>21</sup> He could declare the Hindu king's policy of conniving with the Mughals against his kith and kin as unwise and unethical. He expressed his conviction in a subtle artistic manner:

Just pause and think; it does not serve your personal interests nor is it an act of faith — all this labour is infructuous ultimately. Perched on the hand of the hunter, oh falcon, don't indulge in the killing of other birds!<sup>22</sup>

Gifted with a remarkable insight, Bihari knew that the Mughal Emperor was exploiting the Hindu Kings for selfish ends, and that his respect for them would continue only so long as their prowess was used in the interest of the Mughals.

Bihari had no respect for a greedy man, for greed makes a man miserable and servile to his superiors. Greediness and servility were not compatible with Bihari's character, and that is why even under royal patronage he expressed strong aversion to greed. The poet always thought modesty and humility as the real virtues of man. Humility transports a man to a higher plane

of human existence. The greater a man grows, the humbler he becomes. A virtuous man becomes more modest with his progress and prosperity. On the contrary, a wicked man becomes humble in adversity and grows insolent with the increase in his power and wealth. Pride and insolence are the surest traits of an essentially mean man.<sup>23</sup> The real nature of a knave is unalterable. Time and again, the poet firmly expresses his view that the nature of a wicked fellow can never change.<sup>24</sup>

Just as asafoetida ( hinga) cannot be free from its disagreeable odour even if it is mixed with camphor, so the perverse people do not change in their behaviour and actions even though they happen to live in the company of the noble.<sup>25</sup> The basic, innate nature of a man, good or bad, does not undergo any notable change and remains, more or less, the same. Therefore, Bihari rightly observes that it is always advisable to maintain an attitude of indifference towards people of this kind because discussions or persuasions with them cannot serve any useful purpose in the long run. Thus, the poet has an unswerving faith in the unchangeability of the fundamental, innate nature of man. He asserts that just as by looking with dilated eyes, the actual size of a man's eyes is not enlarged, so a man of mean mentality cannot achieve sublimity by making an exhibition of his greatness.<sup>26</sup> Such people, despite repeated humiliations, behave like a ball that rebounds higher with a stronger stroke. Bihari cautions against such wicked men, for even when they are lying low, they never miss the opportunity to hurt and harm others like the thorns that prick and injure a man even when they are lying under his feet. Their feigned modesty is not natural and spontaneous, and therefore it is always to be looked at with suspicion. As the sight of the spotless moon, being an unnatural phenomenon, is indicative of hard times, likewise a wicked man, when he pretends to shake off his vicious nature, is always dangerous.<sup>27</sup> In fact, amidst the court-life with guiles and wiles all around, Bihari must have come across many such people.

Work and real abilities, not mere good name, are recognised in this world. Hence, without genuine qualities, it is not desirable

for any one to imitate great people. Mere publicity is of no avail; lasting fame is attainable only through solid merits and virtues.<sup>28</sup> People may say whatever they like, but merit cannot be attained by mere propaganda; the cat must come out of the bag one day or the other, and so ultimately the reality prevails. One's pseudo greatness — based on mere titles and designations — cannot command the respect of discreet men, just as the flower of *Bassia catifolia* (gudhala) cannot attract the large black-bee by virtue of its mere colour because it is devoid of fragrance.<sup>29</sup> As the poet observes, an anklet, even if it is studded with gems, always touches the feet, while the small vermilion, even though made of something very insignificant, shines brilliantly on the forehead.

Bihari was fully conversant with the arbitrary nature of the kings who were not afraid of society and did not suffer from the stings of conscience. Even religion and ethics did not interfere in their affairs and naturally they became self-willed and autocratic. Under these circumstances, one was always confronted with the possibility of being humiliated any time. Really, it was impossible to get anything from such rulers without facing humiliation because they had no respect for merit and were not able to recognise easily the worth of men. It is not improbable that the self-pride of the poet should have suffered a set-back during his stay in the court. Naturally, after having observed closely the realities of the court-life, he preferred the life of simplicity with limited desires and means. As a realist, he was well aware of three consequences of wealth — charity, enjoyment, and destruction —, and as such regarded the accumulation of riches as futile.

Bihari does not believe in extremes of any kind. He feels that excess of anything mars the propriety of conduct and ethical norms. Though Bihari's attitude towards ethics of conduct does not approximate to Tulasidasa's, yet he evinces a strong repugnance for impropriety. This is evident from his allegorical reference to the failure of a man to keep within limits at the time excessive prosperity. In spite of his elaborate portrayals of sex-life, Bihari has attached great significance to the decorum of family life. He shows greater respect for a family woman observing social

norms than for one who defies them. Despite his graphic portraits of young beauties and his fascination for urban and court life, the poet does not fail to notice the peculiar charm of a young lady, clad in a freshly washed *sari*, working in the kitchen. Surely, this evinces his attraction for the natural joys of family life.

Bihari has depicted life on a practical plane. In this regard, he is a pure realist, and holds that in this world a man gives importance to another strictly in consonance with his own particular needs. Hence, no one is universally great or small, important or unimportant; he who serves his purpose well is all important to a man.<sup>30</sup> Man loves that which is useful to him. The poet knows it clearly that self-interest is the decisive factor of a man's relationships. For a man, parched with thirst and scorching heat of the desert, a water melon, which satisfies his acute need for water to quench his thirst, is as significant as the ocean.<sup>31</sup> This direct utilitarian attitude, governed by self-interest, reveals the truth that there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so. Really, in this world the decisive factor in human conduct is his own self-interest.

Thus, believing in the world's law of change, Bihari does not feel depressed and retains his optimism. Nobody looks after the plant of swallow wort, but by the grace of the Lord it blossoms and prospers even in the scorching summer. This belief in the benevolence of the Creator approximates to the conviction of Rahim who is inspired by feelings of deep optimism to think that even a rootless creeper flourishes by the grace of God. It was this faith in God that prompted Bihari to criticise the policies and ways of King Jay Simha even though he lived under his patronage. No wonder that even amidst perturbed conditions, Bihari could maintain a balanced attitude and reconcile himself to the changes and chances of life. Amidst material opulence and earthly joys, Bihari always remembered the Lord. He believed that wealth was necessary only to lead life properly, and that it was not an end in itself. If it were possible to live honourably in this world without money, there would hardly be any need for worldly prosperity. In fact, the poet had seen the vices of luxury and lust. He noticed

clearly how the excess of riches debased a man's disposition. It is not surprising that he had developed such an attitude towards opulence, since he had been seen with his own eyes the steep decline in religious, moral, social and human values during his life which began with the last few years of Akbar's reign and ended with the first phase of Aurangazeb's rule.

To conclude, Bihari's poetry is interspersed with his views on the varied aspects of contemporary social scene in particular, and on life in general. Though presented allegorically and epigrammatically, these scattered thoughts give an idea of his over-all outlook which emerges from the vivid portrayal of the general life of his times. In fact, he was incapable of setting himself free from the values and the stream of thought, which were in vogue during his age. Consequently, he shows strong preference for urban culture and betrays a sort of indifference to the hard plight of the common people. He does not comprehend the ordinary villager's economic condition and his struggle for survival. He is neither an iconoclast and a social reformer like Kabir, nor a man of vision giving new direction to society like Tulasidasa, nor a pure and simple devotional poet like Suradasa. In a word, his philosophy of life is that of a cultured, urbanized man, who, influenced by the milieu of his age, gives importance to the enjoyment of life and is not able to cultivate 'the philosophic mind' ( of which the English poet Wordsworth speaks in his great Ode) that enables an artist to rise above the limitations of his age and look into the depth of life.

## References

<sup>1</sup>Visvanath Prasad Misra, *Hindi Sahitya ka Atita*, Part 2 ( Varanasi: Chowkhamba, 2017) ,pp.380-81.

<sup>2</sup>*Bihari-Ratanakara*, that is, *Bihari-Satasai*, annotated by Jagannath Dasa Ratnakara ( Varanasi: Granthakara, 1965) , Couplet no. 94.

<sup>3</sup>Bihari appears to echo Shakespeare's famous statement about love:

...                   ...                   ...                   *Love is not love*  
*Which alters when it alteration finds,*  
Or bends with the remover to remove,

O, no!, it is an ever-fixed mark....

( Sonnetno.116)

<sup>4</sup>*Bihari-Ratnakara*, 658.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 543, 277.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 583.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 444, 57.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 432.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 393.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>12</sup>Dr. Nagendra, *Ritikavya ki Bhumika* ( Delhi: Gautam Book Depot, 1949) , p.180.

<sup>13</sup>*Bihari-Ratnakara*, 241.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*,591.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*,20.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 377.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 590.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 584.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 411.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 366.

## 9

## Jayashankar Prasad's Fiction: An Assessment

A Versatile genius of the highest order, Jayshankar Prasad was a first-rate poet, playwright, novelist, short story writer, essayist and critic. No doubt the poet in him usually eclipsed the other facets of his creative genius, but he was always conspicuous for his fictional writings. True, he was a fictionist all through his literary career; he made a mark as early as the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century when he was in his early twenties, and was deeply engaged in writings a historical novel entitled *Iravati* when the cruel hands of death cut the thread of his life and snatched him from the world in 1937 at the age of forty-eight only. Thus his fictional writings spread all over his literary career of more than two decades and a half. Besides, he occupies a very distinguished place in Hindi fiction, despite the fact that his fictional output is not as copious as that of his celebrated contemporary, Munshi Prem Chand; he has to his credit only five collections of short stories — *Chhaya*, *Pratidhvani*, *Akashadipa*, *Andhi* and *Indrajal* — and three novels — *Kankal*, *Titali* and *Iravati* — of which the last one is incomplete. Hence, it is essential to study and evaluate thoroughly his novels and short stories with a view to understanding his mind and art, and Hindi fiction as well.

## I

Prasad was not as fully engrossed in novel-writing as in poetry and drama, and it can be plausibly explained. First, he was essentially and primarily a poet and playwright, and therefore he resorted to novel-writing only when he found the theme and subject matter of choice unsuitable for poetic or dramatic treatment. Secondly, he practised it to seek a sort of refuge and relaxation

after feeling over-exhausted, emotionally and mentally, as a result of composing intensely emotional and highly imaginative and thoughtful poetry. His taking up *Iravati* after *Kamayani* bears a testimony to it. Lastly, perhaps he seemed to believe that though the novel as a literary form was comparatively easier than poetry or drama, yet it was not as fine and elegant a work of art as the other two genres. No wonder Prasad has bequeathed to us just two novels and a fragment. Before I analyse the basic themes and technical strengths and weaknesses of his novels, it is necessary to survey briefly his novels one by one chronologically in order to discern his growth as a novelist.

Prasad's first novel is *Kankal*, which has simple, realistic and tragic plot. Devaniranjan, who loved Kishori madly in childhood, is terribly upset by the remembrance of his childhood days even when he has renounced the world and leads the life of a sage. As a matter of fact, obsessed by the sense of self-defeat, he escapes from life. On the other hand, due to an unfathomable desire to have a child, Kishori destroys her chaste womanhood. Niranjana is irresistibly excited by her unfulfilled youth. He is terribly torn by an inner conflict between physical love and renunciation, and in the end takes to the path of active association with, and interest in, mundane affairs. Owing to his over-materialistic tendencies, Kishori's husband is indifferent to all this. Consequently, the lovers lead their lives freely without any restrictions. On the other hand, Mangal, a member of a volunteer corps, is moved by the helplessness and miseries of the young prostitute, Tara, and endeavours to bring about a reconciliation between her and lost family; but when he finds her completely rejected by the society, he takes her responsibility on himself. The intimacy between the two results naturally in the husband-wife relationship. But mental imbalance and fear of the public opinion lead him to desert, and run away from, the pregnant Tara who, after making an unsuccessful attempt to commit suicide, again lives a life of helplessness and miseries. She gives birth to a child, takes to begging and seeks shelter at Kishori's. Mangal comes in contact with Kishori's son, Vijaya, during his hostel-life. Vijaya becomes very

intimate with Tara living in the disguise of Yamuna, and he also becomes jealous of Mangal, who is very busy in organizing and directing a residential teaching institution. Jilted by Yamuna, the extremist Vijaya becomes mentally deranged and anti-establishment. He behaves very freely with Ghanti and expresses his faith in Christianity. Unruly and indisciplined, he incurs the displeasure of Kishori and Niranjana and leaves for Mathura. Ghanti's predicament and distress make him seek shelter in the Church and also make him a painter. Yamuna goes to the hermitage of Svami Krishnasharana at Vrindavan. Mangal is suspected and is exiled from there. Yamuna also leaves the hermitage protesting against Vijaya and Ghanti's love. Shrichandra, the husband of Kishori, is given to vices and indulges in adultery with Chanda. Angry with Kishori, Niranjana at last renounces the world, and sets out in search of Vijaya. Shrichandra and Kishori are reconciled again. Injuring severely Nawab who is cruel and wicked to Ghanti, Vijaya absconds for fear of being sentenced to death. But luckily the court gives the judgment in his favour largely due to the support of several men. In the forest, Vijaya passes his days in the disguise of 'Naye.' Gal studies at the school founded by Mangal. "Bharat Sangh" is established by the efforts of Gosvamiji. Mangal sees the dying Kishori for the last time as an ascetic. Yamuna earns her and Vijaya's bread by doing physical work. Mangal and Gal get married. Vijaya is very close to death, and one day he dies of starvation. The workers of "Bharat Sangh" get ready to perform the funeral ceremony. Poor Yamuna arranges the shroud by getting pay in advance. The novel ends on very tragic and depressing note: Mangal sees a shabbily dressed woman sitting beside a helpless dead skeleton with her veil soaked in tears.

*Kankal* gives an idea of the realities of Prasad's age and of the change in his social outlook. Naturally, Nand Dulare Vajapeyi has rightly called it a realistic novel.<sup>1</sup> Surely, it exposes boldly the weaknesses of the society. No character in it is able to maintain morality from the beginning to the end, and is not without inner weaknesses. It presents everyman as a bastard, a hybrid ( or crossbreed) and a child of sin, and every reformer as corrupt and

aberrant. Such a living skeleton of society has not been portrayed anywhere else in Hindi literature. It is quite a thoughtful work in which the entire aristocracy has been looked at with suspicion, and every ideal has been put to the strictest possible test. Such a picture of the distressed and afflicted humanity terribly shakes the whole being of a man and creates a kind of wrath and acrimony in him, thus causing in him deep distrust of the entire social fabric. The novel evidences Prasad's intense emotional experience, sensibility and power of minute observation. Disclosing the secret of the weakness of every well-accepted belief, the novelist lashes out against it with full force and fury. The setting up of "Bharat Sangh" towards the end of the narrative evinces his positive approach, embodying the reformatory form of the corrupt caste-system. The novel fully brings out the author's bold, revolutionary attitude towards society. The protagonist of the novel, Vijaya, is a staunch enemy of Hinduism and communalism. His free thinking and behaviour are on the verge of extremity. In truth, he does not want to crush the natural and tender feelings of young age, and that is why his carefree youth is restless for gratification. The novel artistically shows the sordid reality and perversion of society; it spotlights childwidowhood, craving for children, the corrupt men of religion, prostitution and the basic urges behind the man-woman relationship. Daringly, the novelist presents love much higher than a matter of routine, and attacks the tradition of professional marriage, which makes man lifeless. No doubt, from the social angle, the characters of the novel are bastards and morally indecent, but they also create a small universe of pure and serene love and beauty. In *Vijaya*, the living skeleton of society, there is an amalgam of variegated immoral, indecent and impracticable ways and complexities; but at the same time we see the corrupt practices at holy places, the immoral and degrading acts of the representatives of religion, etc. In short, the novel reflects at once Prasad's bitter criticism of society and his revolutionary desire to purge it. The end of the novel is doubtless very depressing and tragic.

Prasad's second novel, *Titali*, marks a departure from his

first novel, exhibiting a different facet of his novelistic art. Its plot is derived from village life. Shaila returns to India from London in the company of Indradeva whose aristocratic, joint family is internationally opposed to her, and there ensues a sort of conspiracy against her. The breach of filial ties and the split in the family throw Indradeva into terrible agony, anguish and anger. He grows indifferent to the family property and endeavours to become self-dependent. Out of a sheer inner urge, Shaila is absorbed in the plan for village uplift. She comes in contact with Titali, who is the foster-daughter of Ramanath, living in his hermitage. Despite all external oppositions, she marries Madhuan ( Madhuvan) , the companion of her childhood, by blessings of Ramanath, but her married life does not turn out to be a happy one. Indulged in the mutual conflicts of the villagers, Madhuvan punished the tyrants and absconds for fear of punishment. During this period, Titali, with all the strength of her womanhood, starts a school and earns her and her son's livelihood for years. However, throughout she, like an ideal wife, patiently and keenly awaits the return of Madhuvan, who repents for his acts done under provocation. After facing the bitter, complex situations and their consequences, he atlast returns to his family-life, the only true place of repose in life. The novel concludes with ample indications of the happy married life of Titali and Madhuvan.

*Titali* is the manifestation of Prasad's affirmative vision of life. Though it is the recreation of the common, familiar life and is realistic like *Kankal*, its realism is idealistic, for its end is not depressing and nihilistic, but constructive and positive. Instead of presenting a satiric and ironic view of society, it offers a sympathetic outlook on society. Surely, the novelist does not draw a curtain over the sordid realities and distortions of life, but he makes everything offer a constructive and positive attitude towards life. The novel demonstrates his concept of womanhood and his ideal of Indian wife. It is saturated with emotionalism, which forms the basis of truly happy married life. The characters in it are ordinary, vigorous and earthly creatures, whose thoughts, feelings and actions are simple and familiar. Obviously, the

background of the novel is real life and its realism is solid and earthly.

The novelist depicts the contemporary village life fairly well, and portrays every aspect of it on the basis of emotional experience. The novel gives just sporadic indications of the poverty and economic gaps in the village life, and does not exhibit fully the emotional and mental life of the helpless masses suffering terribly in the money-dominated social system; nevertheless, its vivid portrayal of the problems of family life in Indian society is highly commendable. It analyses the varied problems of practical life, and unequivocally accentuates the importance of economic factors in life. Rejecting summarily the feudalistic system, this sublime work of art is a plea in favour of agricultural life and the significance of hardwork. As it is highly poetic, it does not possess the transparent depth of the great writings of Prem Chand; still, it comprehensively scrutinizes the contemporary social problems, and the novelist's sensibility does not weaken anywhere. What is very remarkable about this novel is that it is the first artistic attempt in Hindi fiction to present the synthesis of Western materialism and Eastern spiritualism. It demonstrates that this synthesis is the best means to achieve universal welfare. Even today it looks very modern in that it focuses on the disintegration of family in the modern society governed by money. It reveals Prasad's preoccupation with the bitter emotional experiences of life, the decay of love and fellow feeling, the complexity of individual consciousness, and the economic uncertainty and slavery of woman. The novelist considers man's terrible tendency of hoarding wealth as the principal cause of the predicament and miserable plight of society. It is this which causes mean selfishness in men. The author artistically offers a solution to these baffling complex social problems, and thus evinces his healthy and positive attitude towards life.

*Iravati* is Prasad's last, but incomplete, literary work. In fact, Prasad had an inborn predilection for India's golden past, and hence when he felt fatigued and sad while striving to find a solution to the fearful contemporary social problems, he naturally turned

to the past for regaining his mental, emotional and creative vigour. *Iravati* is, thus, a historical novel, which has an artistic blending of philosophy and imagination. The story of the novel, in brief, runs like this. Charmed by Iravati, Emperor Brahaspatimitra forcibly admits her to a Buddhistic monastery, and there begins his clash with Agnimitra, Ira's former lover. Iravati inadvertently defies the extreme compassion of the Buddhists now and then. Agnimitra is accused of abducting *Iravati* and is punished. The daughter of Nandavansh, Kalindi, organizes "Sivastikadal" with the motive of revenge, and by deceitful means succeeds in getting Agnimitra associated with this cunning conspiracy. Her father, the chief magistrate of Magadh, inspire and urges Agnimitra to serve the State. Just then the Greek invasion is expected, and there is every possibility of a defeat due to the weakness in military strength. Naturally, Chakravarti Kharvel is requested to co-operate. By chance all the characters meet at distinguished Dhanadatta's, and at this point the narrative is left incomplete due to the novelist's sad demise. On the basis of the indirect indications of the movement of the plot, only this much can be guessed that the revolt of the government employees, who are the supporters of spiritualism, against Emperor Brihadrath will turn out to be successful, that Pushyamitra will establish a strong administration, that Ira's and Agnimitra's doubtful re-union will take place, and that the swift, speedy Kalinidi's conspiracy will meet failure.

The novel's central theme is the triumph of the theory of Eternal Bliss as the summum bonum of life ( '*Anandavad*' ) over the non-spiritual, materialistic Bauddha philosophy. As it is incomplete, the writer's final inference is not clear in absolutely definite terms; but the movement of thought and story doubtless points to the above conclusion. In its limited scope, it has in it the seeds of a great, sublime masterpiece. Through the theory of basic, eternal harmony ( '*samarasya-siddhant*' ) of Brahmachari, a major character in the novel, Prasad presents his unflinching faith in reconstruction and recreation. The book depicts the intense mutual conflicts between the Buddhists and the Brahmans in the domain of sectarian philosophy at a time in history when

the Maurya Empire was in its last stage of decline. This clash between the Brahmans and the Buddhists gradually results in sedition, a revolt against the king. The novel abounds in very bold incidents, many of which at times appear miraculous and magical, and hence far from reality. The core of the theme is related to Iravati, and its thought-content is very relevant to our times. The background material is based on historical facts. Most of the events are of great historic fame, though, of course, Prasad has made use of his inventive power here and there. The story has been derived from *Malavikagnimitram* and the *Puranas*, but the character-delineation is Prasad's own. In place of Kalidas's insignificant, jealous Ira, Prasad has created a highly aesthetic and tender-hearted female character in Iravati. Brahmachari is a very significant character in the novel; he is the symbol of the instinctive way of life ( '*pravrittimarg*' ), and is the incarnation of healthy Indian thought and cultural heights. The novel presents a comparative analysis of Indian aesthetic tendency and the Buddhist philosophy of extreme sorrow ( '*atidukhavad*' ), thus offering a fusion of the pleasures of life and self-restraint. Also, it examines the intellectualism of the logicians ( '*vivekavadi*' ). Its cultural background is soaked in historical facts. Prasad has fully grasped the very soul of Indian life and has at the same time recreated the glory of India's wonderful past by dint of his creative genius. It is in this sense that the novel, according to Dr. Nagendra, is Prasad's best work of fiction.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, *Iravati* deserves a close, comprehensive study from varied angles.

## II

After a brief survey of Prasad's novels, I pass on to analyse the thought-contents, the themes, of his fiction, embodying his vision of life and his power of profound thinking. One very patent theme running through *Kankal* and *Titali* is social resurrection or reconstruction. Prasad was a careful observer of the life of his age and was an exceptionally profound thinker. *Kankal* shatters the rigid social conventions, the religious and spiritual rigidity,

and the time-honoured and age-old belief about the individual and community. Mangal, an important character in the novel, pungently remarks about the legal world of today that the laws are usually negative, and the good deeds are very few while sins are in abundance.<sup>3</sup> Again, he observes that the world is confronted with the terrible problem of food, but the Hindu race is still absorbed in primitive, uncultured activities. Another character in the novel, Vijaya, exposing the social anomalies, bitterly satirizes Hinduism in the same vein when he states that most of the Hindu society is in utter misery and poverty: its culture is full of anomalies, and its institutions are meaningless and useless; it is intellectually bankrupt and the leaders of its religion earn their livelihood by terrifying the masses.<sup>4</sup> The scene of the free-for-all among the beggars and dogs on the occasion of the sumptuous, ritualistic feast at Vijaya's exemplifies the kind, merciful religious feelings of the starving society. However, the novelist's reformative zeal makes all this living and positive, for he believes in preservation and creation, and not in destruction. Revolt is, in fact, man's destructive process; the healthy attitude is constructive and positive. To quote Prasad, lack of self-control and weakness of character lead to revolt, while patience ultimately rules human nature, and society is just an expression of human tendencies.<sup>5</sup> This lays bare the novelist's affirmative vision of life. He clearly states that the reformative movement should not be detached and silent, but should be very active and all-embracing because the world is deaf and we have to cry to make it hear us.<sup>6</sup> With this aim, the plan for the "Bharat Sangh" is conceived at Svami Krishnasharan's hermitage to achieve purity, healthy caste-feelings, and genuine social unity, and to establish true religion, ethics, social control and respect for the innately tender-hearted woman. The individual's limited, measured knowledge and teaching may be confusing, but the well-organized endeavour of an institution is indubitably very useful and effective. The writer stresses that the mean selfishness of people does not profane and spoil it; it is quite easy to establish an actually good and healthy society by means of such organizations. Inevitably, the

novel evidence Prasad's conviction that individualistic thinking and idealism should be replaced by ideal reformative institutions.

*Titli* delineates the explicit conflict between idealism and realism. On the one hand, it records vividly Tahsiladar's tyranny towards, and conspiracy against, the farmers, and his evil designs against Sherakot, Banjaria and Dhamapur; on the other hand, it elaborates Shaila's great reformative zeal and work which generate reawakening in people. Fed up with the London life seething with people and wanting in genuine human feelings, she completely mixes up with Indian farmers, in whose life of hard labour, unswerving trust and unflinching contentment she discerns peace; in fact, in them she discovers the true life. In short, the novel embodies the writer's intense desire for vast improvement in the lot of Indian masses, and for the future welfare of Indian society as a whole. He clearly suggests that some accomplished educated men should settle down in villages, resisting the temptations of city life, in order to bring about a genuine social reconstruction and resurrection.<sup>7</sup> His exposition of the problem of urbanization and his solution to the problem of social reconstruction in India, presented in the early thirties of the present century, certainly evinces his wonderful foresight and right thinking.

Prasad is very seriously concerned with the right place of woman in society. He is deeply moved by her miserable plight, which he describes by remarking pungently that woman has no place in society and is only the tail of man, and what is very queer about this tail is that sometimes it can easily be set aside to live in separation.<sup>8</sup> He sees the life of Hindu woman as a curse, and very painfully observes that the creation of women is only an expression of God's irritation.<sup>9</sup> Throughout her life she has to die. Unable to bear the tyranny of man, she at last feels constrained to burn herself to death like Padmini, and men, like Allauddin, scatter away the burnt ashes.<sup>10</sup> According to Prasad, the entire human life of today is only a satire on her modesty and helplessness.<sup>11</sup> She has to stick to one religion only, and that is, the capacity to bear blows, physical, emotional and mental. Woman has a natural right for love, and she is made to have love either

through the dignified way of marriage or through debauchery. Prasad's novels not only show the extremely painful life of woman, but also preach a good deal to improve her lot. In *Iravati*, through Dhanadatta, the novelist elaborates the duty and responsibility of a noble and chaste married woman. He states that a woman, who has no patience and tolerance, cannot protect or maintain her modesty and virtues. He defines the married woman as one who is always obsessed with the desire for the welfare of her husband's family, who offers food to everyone in the house without caring for herself, and who is generally cheerful and above complaint and grudge.<sup>12</sup> Prasad is averse to the modern, intolerant woman's insolent and indecent attempts at achieving complete emancipation. He does not consider the insolence of woman useful and fruitful in any way. He affirms that woman will remain woman, and what she is trying to do out of a deep sense of restlessness and grief is not true to her inborn nature — it is only a revolt, and therefore much impertinence and rebellion is not proper and necessary for a real reform in her condition.<sup>13</sup> What is necessary for improving her lot is that she should be emancipated from economic slavery. Her personal needs must be fulfilled. Prasad is of the view that woman needs adequate amount of wealth, for when she is left all alone without the care and protection of man, she has nobody to help her except wealth.<sup>14</sup> Indradeva in *Titali* rightly asserts that every family is decrepit and disorganized because of the conflict between woman's love and revolt, and our joint family is necessarily a failure resulting from this economic slavery of theirs.<sup>15</sup> Prasad has offered practical suggestion pertaining to reforms in women's life and family through several of his characters.

Closely allied to this is the theme of family-feeling in Prasad's novels. In *Titali*, there are mainly two families. Indradeva has everything, but not co-operation and happiness. On the contrary, in the small family of Titali, there is nothing but mutual love. Inevitably, the members of the latter's family are really happy, fighting easily against the odds and deficiencies of life by dint of their mutual love and co-operation. Prasad laments the pitiable

and painful life in the joint family — the breaking away of its units and links.<sup>16</sup> An Indian is born and brought up amidst family-love and tenderness, and hence the feelings of sympathy, co-operation and love are also very strong in him due to the traditional culture. The consciousness of Hinduism is at a continuous decline. Man has great attachment for his small narrow family, having little concern with life beyond his family. In Prasad's opinion, a Hindu, down-trodden for the centuries, has lost his collective consciousness, and thus while people of other castes and tribes eat fine and sumptuous food in the utensils made of ordinary or Chinese clay, a Hindu takes a very ordinary food like *sattu* in a silver plate.<sup>17</sup> In fact, at times the novelist's attitude towards the contemporary Hindu family life is quite pessimistic.

Another theme in Prasad's novels is the dignity and greatness of culture and philosophy. They logically examine the cultural elements. The discussion of Indian and Western cultures, civilizations and sciences between Indradeva and Ramanath in *Titali* is of great significance in this regard. Comparing and contrasting the Indian and European cultures, Prasad, through Ramanath, emphasizes the value of Indian spiritualism for bringing about mental equilibrium in the people for their permanent welfare, which is not attainable through the machine civilization of the West. Ramanath further asserts that the West is only creating a physical body which will have life only by means of Indian spiritualism, and thus the East and West can have a genuine unity which will inescapably result in the spontaneous happy flow of human life.<sup>18</sup> This synthesis of the two should be the unique, final truth of human existence. Prasad is averse to mental control over man, for it causes the narrowness of thinking. In India, life is not merely struggle, but the attainment of the indivisible joy, bliss. Addressing to Shaila, Ramanath states that while in the West people have made not only life but even the land, water and sky as the centre of clashes and wars, in India we are preached to wage war only against the devilish feelings and thoughts which are the enemy of soul.<sup>19</sup> Prasad rejects the Vedanta which makes

man indifferent to, and disinterested in, the worldly existence by labelling it a mere illusion. According to him, it is communal, just cold logic. The real Vedanta is something very practical. No doubt, its basis is individualism, but it aims at protecting man from the rigid, social conventions. The freedom of the individual creates a strong sense of equality in him. Life cannot be all struggle and conflict, for struggle leads men to separation and destruction, while life is co-operation and creation. Even in Christian religion, which has the Aryan message, there is stress on mutual co-operation and service. Human life abounds in varied desires. This is why Indradeva thinks that it is not desirable and useful to eliminate the colourful desires from the beautiful picture of life, and to turn it into a mere sketch or line drawing; there must appear in it the golden virtues and dark vices, the light and shade of pleasure and pain, and the red and green of shame and cheerfulness.<sup>20</sup>

Lastly, Prasad's novels are all expression of his philosophy of Eternal Bliss as the summum bonum of life. His concept of Eternal Bliss stands for the creation of joy and welfare, and the elimination of grief and anguish. Enthusiasm for bliss, as he asserts in *Iravati*, is life.<sup>21</sup> The feeling of bliss ends every kind of sorrow completely. The moment man attains it, sin does not dare come near him. Brahmachari vociferously and emphatically asserts it.<sup>22</sup> Imaginary sorrow and extremes of reasoning are great hindrances in man's way of achieving Eternal Bliss. Brahmachari claims that his thinking is not lame; it enables man to live blissfully, and this state of bliss is not antagonistic to any man living in any state of life; in it give and take do not have separate entities and are not in conflict with each other.<sup>23</sup> He downright discards the Buddhist philosophy of liberation from existence. Rejecting the Buddhist doctrine of nihilism and freedom from materialism, Prasad propounds the theory of Eternal Bliss, and *Iravati* is invaluable in this context. In it he asserts that in the interest of humanity, we have to revive the ancient Indian culture and things associated with it which we consider injurious and worthless because of extreme logic and reasoning in them.<sup>24</sup> To avoid the death of

our intellectual pride, we will have to stress the value of the theory of Eternal Bliss.<sup>25</sup> The novel completely rejects cowardice and despondency which we practice in the name of non-violence and transiency of life. Thus Prasad accentuates self-reliance and self-confidence which infuse into man zeal, courage and hope.

### III

An analysis of the major theme in Prasad's novel should necessarily be followed by an examination of his novelistic techniques — viz., plot-structure, characterization, atmosphere, style, narrative technique, etc. The plot of *Kankal* is taken from the visible, ordinary world. The events are related to the holy places, such as Hardwar, Mathura, Kashi and Vrindavan. With the main plot are woven loosely several contextual secondary plots. The autobiography of Gal's mother is one such secondary plot which, despite the novelist's efforts to link it closely with the main plot, remains episodic and disconnected and somewhat redundant from the structural point of view. The main plot is built upon the conflict between social and religious tendencies. The plot-structure of this novel is elaborate. The variegated activities of a fairly good number of characters make it bulky, and a little misshaped. The organization of events is at times unnatural. In fact, the plot-structure the novel is not compact and well-knit. The reunion of long separated characters is rather unconvincing. The same character appears repeatedly as Gulenar, Tara and Yamuna respectively and unite the scattered threads of the plot. Likewise, the threads of the narrative are unnecessarily expanded by the introduction of an aunt, a beggar and abnormal characters. Obviously, the plot abounds in coincidence, and all this makes it unnatural, though it has certainly spontaneous and absorbing movement. The hermitage at Vrindavan is the meeting-point of most of the major characters, and the threads of the plot are controlled from there. In a word, structurally, *Kankal* is not a good, flawless work.

The subject-matter of *Titali* is derived from village life, and

the novel paints the social history of the decline of the feudal system. Also, it portrays the miserable condition of villages and the disintegration of joint families. The novelist's individualistic consciousness and its personal experience find free expression in this book. The plot embodies the individualistic views about romantic love and convictions of life. It successfully analyses and realistically presents the philosophical schools of India and Europe. Maintaining his love for the old, the novelist establishes the validity of new convictions and beliefs, thus portraying effectively the conflicts emanating from complex social situations. No doubt, the plot-organization is somewhat overelaborate and has some apparent, absurd joints here and there, but on the whole it is balanced and proportionate. The novelist remarkably succeeds in fusing into an artistic, compact whole the rural farming community and the urban population, the conditions of the working class and the feudal class, the deteriorating tendency of joint families, the bitterness of Indian society and the successful plan for the social renaissance. The plot has natural movement and interest from the beginning to the end, and it concludes with a happy note soaked in curiosity and wonder.

The plot of *Iravati* is based on ancient Indian history. The basic story has the support of historians like Majumdar, Smith and Jayaswal; it belongs to the Mauryan Age. Even the *Puranas* abound in references to Vrihadrath, Shatadhanush, Kalinga, Chakravarti, Kharvel, Pushyamitra, Agnimitra and others. The main story pivots around Brahmachari and it progresses through him. The plot-structure of *Iravati* is indubitably well-organized, fascinating and dynamic. Sometimes strange, unnatural happenings occur, making the narrative spasmodically dominated by the miraculous and magical elements. There is movement and boldness in it throughout. But the plot-organization does not suffer from long digressions and redundant material. As it is incomplete, it is difficult to pronounce a definite, final judgment on it; but even then its artistic and structural excellence is conspicuous, and hence

it cannot be underestimated.

#### IV

Prasad's characterization is effective and artistic. Every character in *Kankal* suffers from human weaknesses. The hero, Vijaya, is extremist, haughty, impudent and iconoclastic. Niranjana suffers from hypocrisy, self-affliction and vanity, and Kishori from lust, wilfulness and the desire for self-purification. Mangal moves helplessly between strength and weakness, and the novelist describes him as a sin enwrapped in purity and enlightenment, a definite truth enveloped in weakness.<sup>26</sup> As a matter of fact, the novel evinces greatness in weak characters, and weak traits in great characters. It reveals the decline of idealism, and the morally depraved people's sincere endeavour to rise to dignity and nobility. But these characters do not propagate anything, nor do they project any definite ideal of the writer; they neither enunciate any theory, nor lead to any definite conclusion. Vijaya is an extremist everywhere. He is governed by the licentiousness and impertinence of youth. Though extremely intellectual, he has no time to think wisely and reasonably on any matter. Consequently, he ceaselessly rolls down the road of corruption and degradation, and does not try to stay and stop. In the end, disillusioned by everything and every relationship, Vijaya — the son of a millionaire — dies of starvation. His will-power and free-thinking are at times highly commendable. He does not approve of social restrictions, for he does not fear either sin or public opinion. Small wonder he can make a bold, unconventional statement that he believes in free love and those, who consider unmarried life animal-like and licentious, are absolutely wrong, for the true marriage is the genuine union of hearts and so there is no need for meditation or recitation of Vedic hymns for it.<sup>27</sup>

Madhuvan in *Titli* loses all sense of duty to his destructive activities and inclinations. The novelist repeatedly refers to it and avers that Madhuvan is opposed to social order and system.<sup>28</sup> He commits crime and in an attempt to hide it he daily commits new crimes. He returns to his early initial state of life after in-

volving in variegated activities; he quarrels in the village, beats Chaubey, runs away with the money-bag of the priest after strangling him, meets Mania, works in the coal mines, flees to Calcutta after killing Chirkit, works with Biru, becomes rickshaw-puller, attacks Maina and Shyam Mohan and is again imprisoned, serves people in the fair, etc., etc. Titali is infused with unparalleled zeal for dignified womanhood and duty, Ramanath is saturated with the sublime notion of high ideals and the sense of strict self-denial and self-sacrifice. In fact, Titali has a resplendent, inspiring and captivating personality. Miseries and tragedies of her early life — her infancy in the midst of starvation, childhood without affection, and youth without the honeyed-love of Madhua, the companion of her childhood — make her so unhappy and helpless that for quite sometime she fails to live a normal life. Her strong sense of self-defeat is absolutely natural and true to human nature. But in her the sense of self-reliance is always strong. She does not accept her smallness or insignificance before a person exhibiting self-importance. She fights against the fearful, extreme misfortunes and odds of life, and evidences immense capacity, courage and power to fight. She cannot bear the exemplification of vain glory and the importance of the tyrannical society. She tells Shaila that she wants to bear her sorrows and joys herself, for she has met with utter disappointment in her efforts to seek help here and there and everywhere; she wants to extract joy from her helplessness and misery, and does not want any one to love her.<sup>29</sup> She has led a life of dignity and nobility and hence says to her son, Mohan, that her mother has not done any such work as he may ever be put to shame.<sup>30</sup> Prasad's art of characterization is very natural, and is always in accordance with the situation; there is always a harmony between the characters and the situation.

The basic purpose of the novel, *Kankal*, is well indicated by its very title; it aims at portraying the actual picture of society. *Titali* presents the constructive side of the future form of society. *Iravati* enunciates the theory of Eternal Bliss through philosophical conflicts. Patently, from the viewpoint of purpose, his novels are

great works of art, and their artistic aims are absolutely acceptable and convincing in their contexts.

Prasad creates a suitable atmosphere for his narratives, and is particularly skilful in creating appropriate surroundings for the situations and events. He sets his three novels in three different periods. *Kankal* portrays the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the incidents are mostly related to the holy places and the reformatory centres. *Titali*, on the other hand, gives the glimpses of feudal system and plans for the uplift of villages. The influences of the reformatory movements and renaissance are clearly perceptible on the life depicted in this novel. *Iravati* has remote history as its background. Portraying the ideological and philosophical conflicts in the India of the Shunga Age, it reveals and accentuates the value and desirability of the philosophy of Eternal Bliss for the modern times.

The language and style of Prasad's novels are usually in consonance with the plot and characters. Though the stamp of the writer's poetic genius is present everywhere, yet the language is generally simple, natural, effective and figurative. Owing to the thought-contents of the novel, the style of *Iravati* is undoubtedly often philosophical and difficult. However, on the whole, Prasad's style in his novels is effective, artistic and delightful.

## V

Prasad's short stories fall under two groups: the early and the later. With the fables and short episodic narratives of *Chitradhar*, he made his debut as a short story writer, and soon attained a certain stature with the publication of the next two collections, *Chhaya* and *Pratidharni*. After that came out chronologically, *Akashadip*, *Andhi* and *Indrajal*, which are surely the writer's representative, mature and great works. The progress of his art of short story writing from "Gram" to "Salavati" is, indeed, very remarkable and significant. The growth of Prasad should be seen not only from the angle of technique but also from that of theme, since he, according to the noted critic, Lakshmi Narayan Lal, is

the only Hindi short writer whose story is governed by thought-content more than by technique.<sup>31</sup> Naturally, in this short survey of his stories, I shall examine his early and later stories separately in two different sections.

Prior to the stories published in the collection entitled *Andhi* Prasad composed only a few fables or short episodic narratives (called in Hindi *Akhyayika*), brought out under the title *Chitradhar*, and so *Andhi* is his first collection of short stories. The stories of this collection are the manifestation of the first flowering of his romanticism. They contain the immature love-dreams of the young romantic poet. In the words of the author, these short, episodic narratives are only the shadows or images of the episodes they narrate.<sup>32</sup> No doubt, they contain the seeds of his great later fiction, but they are initial attempts of the author to write fiction, and hence they are not very remarkable either in plot-organization or in the art of minute character-delineation. Nevertheless, they also reveal the young, growing artist's concern with ordinary life, his clear grasp of emotional life, and his interest in re-creating historic annals. "Gram," which appeared in this collection, is Prasad's first original story and is doubtless very prominent among the earliest original stories in Hindi. It is based on realism and its characters are painted artistically and clearly. Its subject-matter is simple and ordinary, but it is saturated with curiosity and wonder. Its style is highly emotional and deliberate. The story, "Tansen," is a romantic love story, which is remarkable for the graphic emotional portrayal of nature and atmosphere. Another notable story in the collection is "Chanda," which is a love story, describing a heinous murder out of jealousy. The romantic atmosphere permeates the entire story. "Rasiya Balam" is built upon the ideal of the legend of Shiri-Farhad, and hence the scenes and situations are at times very poetic, picturesque and colourful. For instances, there is the lovely scene of the first blossoming of jasmine buds at the touch of the first rays of the peeping morning sun. "Sharanagat" is an expression of the author's cultural consciousness, while "Sikandar ki Shapath" marks the beginning of his tradition of historical narratives. The other notable stories in

the collection are: "Chittaur," "Uddhar," "Ashok," "Gulam," "Jahanara" and "Madanamrinalini." The last one with which the collection concludes is a touching portrait of the unsuccessful sacrifice of love.

Prasad's next collection of short stories, *Pratidhvani*, evinces the growth of his mind and art. No doubt, it is marked by the weaknesses in plot-structure and characterization, but it is very successful in the artistic delineation of feelings, thoughts and situations. The style is mature and refined. The volume displays the sprout of Prasad's wonderful genius. Influenced by *Gitanjali*, the story, "Prasad," explores the theme of dedication and self-offering, and though weak in plot, it is fascinating and impressive. "Gudar Sain" is the portrait of a liberated soul, who is the living jewel of the great spiritual tradition. While "Gudari men Lal" is about a self-respecting old woman who does not barter away her self-respect for the alms of handful grains, the story "Aghori ka Moh" paints life's complexities showing the irony of circumstances. "Pap ki Parajaya" is a beautiful story dealing with lust, beauty and duty. Suggestively it presents the author's self-experienced inner conflict: "Is beauty a thing of worship only, and not meant for use or taste?"<sup>33</sup> "Sahayog" treats married life, particularly some of the basic truths related to man-woman relationship, while "Pathar ki Pukar" is based on history and "Usa Par ka Yogi" is the writer's first story immersed in mysticism. "Karuna ki Vijaya" deals with the national theme pathetically; "Khandahar ki Lipi" and "Chakravarti ka Stambh" treat history; "Kalavati ki Shiksha" abounds in the sayings of a mature, erotic uneducated woman; "Dukhiya" paints the pathetic life of a poor, self-respecting woman; and "Pratima" is an emotional portrayal of a God of temple, symbolizing reverence, love and faith. The volume concludes with the exquisite story, "Pralaya," which is a fine blending of imagination, art and philosophy, foreshadowing Prasad's great epic, *Kamayani*. It ends on a note of hope and good wishes. Apparently, these early stories are indispensable for the understanding of Prasad's fiction, as they reveal the various stages in the growth of his mind and art.

Plot-structure in Prasad's early stories is significant. The plots of the stories in *Chhaya* and *Pratidhvani* can be classified as descriptive, symbolic and historic. The plot in them can easily be analysed like a line-drawing or a prose-poetry. It seldom has a problem or a particular elaborate thought. The plot-organization is quite often very commendable, having both minuteness and suggestiveness. "Aghori ka Moh," "Gudari men Lal" and "Karuna ki Vijaya" are stories with this kind of plot. In the tradition of prose-poetry, "Pralaya," "Dukhiya," "Kalavati ki Shiksha," etc. are notable; the subtle feelings of heart find spontaneous and eloquent expression in the right context in them. The plot of "Pralaya" is very complex, but the philosophy presented through the images of feelings and thoughts is highly synthesized, and the mysticism in its theme is extremely profound. But other historical stories are well-knit, and have fluent movement. Most of these early stories have some basic, significant problem, inspiring the writer to express emotional sensibility in the form of prose-poetry. It is through the images of feelings that the author portrays the innermost recesses of the heart. In these stories, the plot is somewhat abstract, and is not very clear and well-organized, but socially they are enveloped in definite meaning and significance. Also, they abound in unity and flow of thoughts and feelings. "Chanda" and "Gram" exemplify these traits. Perhaps, owing to the impact of Rabindranath Tagore, Prasad has a penchant for history, prose-poetry and excessive emotional sensibility in most of the stories of *Pratidhvani*. In two or three stories, there are indications of psychoanalysis too.

Men and women in Prasad's early stories usually have sublime character and personality. They embody basic human values. They are emotional, tender-hearted and sometimes pathetic. They are the models of love, compassion and self-sacrifice. They experience a terrible inner conflict between forgiveness and revenge. Most of Prasad's women are the symbols of ancient ideals; but a few of them also embody modernity. They evince revolutionary attitude against absurd social preventions and compulsions, and are capable of making bold sacrifices. The

male characters are generally soaked in love, and appear as Messiah of unbounded love and self-sacrifice. However, they develop a sense of duty and social consciousness as a result of the inspiration they derive from women. Generally, women are exceptionally youthful, accomplished and bewitchingly beautiful. Like women, men are naturally emotional and dedicated to love. They are kind, dignified and extraordinarily self-sacrificing. Usually, Prasad's characters are lovers of art and poetry. They have in their disposition innocence, tenderness and sensitivity, and hence are very interesting to the reader. The characters in imaginative and symbolic stories are more secretive and mystical than those in other kinds of stories. The stress on personality is of secondary importance in these stories. Several of the characters are simply an incarnation of certain human feelings and emotions. The range of Prasad's characterization is not very wide, and we do not come across a great variety of characters in his stories. The motive force behind them is love and grief. However, he employs some of the well-known techniques of character-portrayal; sometimes his technique is purely descriptive and direct as in "Indrajal"; sometimes it is symbolic as in "Chitravaley Patthar"; sometimes he delineates characters mainly through incidents as in "Anbola"; and sometimes he portrays them primarily through dialogues as in "Akashdip". What is remarkable is that none of these techniques of character-portrayal hampers or impairs the element of imagination and sensibility in them.

The style of Prasad's earlier stories is emotional and realistic. It is interesting throughout, and is as emotional and symbolic as that of prose-poetry. The writer begins his story with the picture of a natural scene or with plot or with mutual discussions. For instance, "Dukhiya" in *Pratidhvani* opens with the description of a natural scene, and "Patthar ki Pukar" with a discussion between two friends. The plots of these stories are saturated with natural emotional sensitivity, and the problems they deal with are not of great importance. The plot in everyone of them is woven around some fundamental emotion or feeling. Apparently, there is little scope for a clear outline of proportionate growth in this

technique. We clearly mark in these stories the exposition of theme, inner conflict, climax and resolution. According to Prasad, technique in a work of art should not be static. No wonder the climax of Prasad's story is very emotional and evocative, and as such it not only moves the reader but also gives birth to a new theme or problem. Often the writer creates the climax early in the story. In these stories, some psychological truth gets an artistic expression in the climax. Their plots bring out ready-wit or intellectual quickness, which is at once practical and artistic. The minute subtleties of feelings are exquisitely delineated in them. Universal truth, philosophy, self-sacrifice and compassion find natural expression in them; they are particularly remarkable for the artistic assertion of the compassion of Buddhism and the concept of Eternal Bliss of the Aryan philosophy through the dialogues and actions of characters. After making an exposition of the purpose and theme of the story, the writer concludes it with a highly emotive climax or crisis. Some of his historical stories like "Gulam" and "Ashok" are dominated by situations and coincidences, and in them emotionalism and poetic element are of secondary importance. In a word, Prasad's early stories are generally stories of characters, and despite their numerous strengths, as enumerated above, they are certainly not his representative stories either from the viewpoint of thought-content or from the standpoint of technique.

## VI

Prasad's later stories, which appeared in three volumes, namely, *Andhi*, *Indrajal* and *Akashdip*, are the high watermark of his fictional art; true, in them we find the full flowering of his art of story-writing. The plot of these stories are comparatively very emotional, thought-provoking, philosophical and artistic. They are very vast in scope and are fully mature thematically and technically. They contain the elements of prose-poetry and line-drawing. They are comparatively very long and very rich in sensitivity. "Andhi", "Puraskar", "Svarga ke Khandahar", etc. bear witness to it. They

are devoid of dramatic love, characterizing the stories of *Chhaya*, and of adolescent emotionalism overflowing the tales of *Pratidhvani*.

The plots of these later stories are highly artistic, and are built on the emotional plane of realism with the help of colourful imagination. The canvas in some of these stories is very vast, as for instance, the entire age is painted in "Salavati." The writer has presented his thematic inferences with commendable objectivity. The aesthetic emotionalism of Prasad's poetic heart is in abundance in these stories, but it contributes to the natural creative process and technique rather than to hamper and mar them; it also helps to organize the action, reaction, thrill and inner conflict. The inner conflict between duty and desire in Champa in "Akashdip" is a fine specimen of the writer's mature art. The plots are generally natural and convincing. Along with the absorbing narration of events, Prasad concentrates upon the inner life and psychoanalysis of his men and women. In shorter stories, this plane of emotional and inner life is mainly depicted symbolically; there we find more poetic element than description and psychoanalysis. The plots have more suggestiveness than direct story-element. Evocativeness and abstraction characterize them from the beginning to the end. And this is surely an exquisite mode of plot-structure. The typical boldness in "Gunda" is evident in the portrayal of the inner reality of man and the realities of society. This story is remarkable not only for its suggestiveness, but also for its artistic delineation of a social problem. These later stories touch the sensitive reader's heart. No doubt, Prasad is not much concerned with the taste of the common people, and this is a limitation of his art; but his writings are commendable for their artistic excellence of high order. Some of the tales like "Andhi" and "Salavati" are a bit unnecessarily lengthy and at places the events are not well-linked: still they are not deficient in natural sensitivity and artistic effect, which are undoubtedly the admirable features of these stories.

The dialogues in these stories of Prasad's mature period are in consonance with the context and situation. They reveal the writer's profundity of ideas, and at the same time impart mo-

vement to the plot. An exquisite poetic touch marks these dialogues, which fully express human sensibility and emotions. Though at times quite lengthy, they have few parallels in Hindi literature so far as dramatic effectiveness and artistic excellence are concerned. Placed between action, description and events, they possess remarkable expressiveness and emotional grandeur. Prasad is deeply influenced by philosophy and this is why his dialogues are saturated with humanism, compassion and pity. Sometimes they abound in felt psychological experiences. They are so rich in poetry that the development of the plot is occasionally hampered. Intense emotional experience and powerful self-expression make these stories lyrics in prose. The predominance of thematic sensitivity in them relegates the situations and events to the secondary place. "Akashadip" is a glaring specimen of this. "Bhikarin," "Churivali," "Devadasi" and "Mamata" are precious treasures of fictional writing on account of unfathomable sensitivity.

From the viewpoint of characterization, Prasad's later stories are highly artistic. In them, almost every important character is emotional, compassionate and an aesthete. Love dominates and thrills his whole being. Interested in philosophy, these characters are often serious thinkers torn by powerful inner conflicts. Obviously, they are more active internally rather than physically. In the female characters, one comes across a lovely synthesis of love, beauty, action, duty and compassion. They have the irresistibly attractive youth and the drunkenness of pain. The overflowing youth of Mamata is the dumb portrait of the tragic world of a widow. The agitated and grief-stricken heart of Bela deeply moves a sensitive reader spontaneously. Along with natural beauty, these characters are endowed with active and positive submission, courage, sacrifice, sensitiveness and other such virtues. Their inner conflicts are embedded in the realities of life. Infinite love, sacred sense of duty, terrible sense of revenge and immeasurable magnanimity and generosity are their ideals of life. Champa's forgiveness and revengeful inner-conflicts are artistically delineated in "Akashdip"; this sweet, delicate lady is ex-

tremely stern in the matter of duty. In these women we see the acme of the sense of duty, and yet they are absolutely true to life. Nira, Sujata, Madhulika and Salavati are, in fact, the very incarnation of the eternal woman. In these stories, usually the male characters are comparatively of secondary importance, but they are ideals of genuine courage and fine sensibilities. Arun, Buddhagupta and Abhaya are people in whom we can easily see the full flowering of human personality. They are matchless in stability and strength of character. Abhaya in "Salavati" is dedicated to the sublime ideal of love, while Arun's bold expedition and Buddhagupta's dauntless courage leave an indelible stamp on the reader's mind. Gunda is a unique instance of character-portrayal. Nevertheless, in these stories men, on the whole, are weak and shadowy in comparison with women.

Prasad's later stories fully reveal his command of dialogues and narrative technique. The elements of Indian dramatic style are usually present in his technique of story-telling. Often he opens a story with dialogues with a view to creating the dramatic effect. The beginning of "Churivali" or "Akashadip" evidences it. This method is well-suited to the revelation of characters and inner conflicts. Without damaging the elements of curiosity and thrill, the writer successfully employs the first-person singular point of view in "Chitravale Patthar" and "Beri." In "Devdasi," he resorts to the epistolary method of narration. After introducing the problem, he presents the main theme and the conflict emanating from it. "Salavati" and "Devarath" are exquisitely built around inner conflicts, bringing out the truth of feelings. The climax is followed by a brief resolution, revealing a similar conclusion. In "Akashdip" and "Andhi," the writer is deeply concerned with natural sensitivity, and consequently the element of surprise is relegated to a secondary place in them. The climax embodies a psychological truth.

Lastly, the later stories of Prasad exhibit his skilful and artistic use of language. His competence to wield the power of words enables him to express easily and effectively even the most intense feelings, philosophical thoughts and psychological realities. When

he deals with history and culture, his style becomes highly suggestive, poetic and artistic. Owing to his wonderful subtle insight, he has been able to make a very effective use of the words and terms particularly related to philosophy, history, culture, etc. What is remarkable about the style in these stories is the appropriate close relationship between the matter and the manner, the content and the expression. His style fully suits the complex problems, intense sensibilities and profound emotional experiences treated in these stories. In dealing with the realities of life, his style is direct and matter-of-fact; but it becomes philosophical and mystical while treating serious and sublime situations and moments. Although in "Salavati", occasionally obscure and difficult because of too much philosophy and complex working of imagination, in simple and sweet scenes his style is very juicy, figurative, poetic and delightful; every word of it conveys a lot.

To conclude, Prasad's fiction fully brings out his highly original creative genius, art and ideas, and is very rich in philosophy, imagination and emotional experience. It presents the romantic and aesthetic poet as primarily a social being. It embodies his vision of life, and reveals his power of analysing his age and his tendency to accentuate the eternal in society. As there is predominance of individual life in it, it may well be labelled as individualistic fiction. But together with individualism, It exhibits the writer's social consciousness. As a matter of fact, it is an amalgam of the reality of life and individualistic thinking. Besides, it depicts the individual psychologically. While it portrays individual consciousness as something essentially internal and self-centred, it shows the social consciousness of the middle-class people in its entirety. Prasad is more than a romantic idealist in these works; he is quite often a realist out and out. Fiction to him is essentially social, and he does not attempt to escape from the religious and commonplace complexities of life. Dr. Nagendra justly affirms that his feelings pertaining to the external life are at times somewhat bitter and sharp, and that he had boldly exposed the worthlessness of several of the existing social institutions.<sup>34</sup> But at the same time these works are not devoid of sweet, ro-

mantic love and aesthetic experience. His outlook on life has helped in correcting and improving the society; it nowhere violates the norms and ideals. Even from the viewpoint of technique, his fiction is commendable, displaying his command of characterization, plot-structure, dialogues, atmosphere, narrative method and style. Inevitably, his novels and short stories are indispensable for a correct and comprehensive understanding of his mind and art and of Hindi fiction as a whole.

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- <sup>26</sup>*Kankal*, p.115.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p.188.

<sup>28</sup>*Titali*, p.219.

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