IJEK International Journal for Exchange of Knowledge: 1 (1): 16- 22, 2014 ISSN 2394-1669

THE NOTE OF MELANCHOLY IN MATTHEW ARNOLD'S POETRY

DEVYANI SINGH*
Dept. of English, Bokaro Steel City College, Bokaro, Jharkhand, India - 827006
devyanisinh@gmail.com

Keywords
Religious controversies, Pessimism, Analytical, Introspective

Received on:
15.05.2014
Accepted On:
09.07.2014
***Corresponding Author**

ABSTRACT
Matthew Arnold was deeply influenced by his age. It was an age in which the Industrial Revolution had increased the wealth and prosperity of the nation. The people had become materialistic in attitude and the spiritual life had been given up by the masses. There was an obsession with the religious controversies of the age which was the result of Darwin's *'The Origin of Species'* and the advancement of science. It was no longer possible to believe blindly in the biblical story of creation told in the Genesis. Man was wavering between religion and science. Arnold suddenly found himself without any control in a world of lost faith and desire. In Arnold (1822-1888) one can thus catch the first glimpses of Victorian pessimism, the pessimism of an age of transition and uncertainties. His poetry thus reflects his temperament - one who is analytical, introspective, prone to weight and reluctant to be swayed by emotions.

MATTHEW ARNOLD

"The poetry of later paganism lived by the senses; and incidentally, the poetry of medieval Christianity lived by the heart and the imagination. But the main element of the modern spirits life is neither the senses nor understanding, nor the heart and imagination; it is the poetry of reason'' (Compton 1991)

In this last phrase the germ of the poetry of pessimism is present. It was the endeavour to rationalize the visions of the imaginative life that led Arnold, Clough, Fitzgerald, and James Thompson into that mood of wishful melancholy that crystallized into a more or less pessimistic criticism of life. In Arnold (1822-1888) one can thus catch the first glimpses of Victorian pessimism, the pessimism of an age of transition and uncertainties. In temperament, analytical introspective, prone to weigh, reluctant to be swayed by emotions, he felt the intellectual difficulties of his time, and could never quite escape their disturbing atmosphere. Empedocles solves the problem by throwing himself into a ravine. Arnold more controlled and less emotional, throws himself into a sonnet, or elegy, and thereby eases his mind.

Matthew Arnold was deeply influenced by his age; an age in which the Industrial Revolution had increased the wealth and the prosperity of his nation. The result was that the people became materialistic in attitude. The spiritual values of life had been forsaken by the masses. Moreover, Arnold was obsessed with the religious controversies of the age which came in the wake of Darwin's *'The Origins of Species'* and the advancement of science. It was no longer possible to believe implicitly in the biblical story of creation told in Genesis. Man was wavering between religion and science. The old faith was fast crumbling down and there was nothing to take its place. Arnold felt himself suddenly set adrift in a world of lost

faith and blind desire. He experienced a poignant regret at the decay of the old faith and the impossibility of accepting the new philosophy of science with its alluring appeal. 'Dover Beach' (1967) is a fine reflection of Arnold's melancholy temperament and his dismay at the retreating tide of religious faith:

"The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full and round earths shore
Lay like the folds of a bright griddle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long withdrawing roars'' (Palgrave 1985)

This attitude towards religion was the most characteristic feature in Arnold. His negative attitude towards faith was closely related to his position in history. He stood just far enough away from the French revolution to look back upon it and its effects in a spirit of criticism. It had shattered the old world, and left in the place of an ordered system only –

"blocks of the past, like icebergs high"
floating "on a rolling sea" (Walker Hugh 1964)

On the other hand, he was not far enough away to enable him to see what was to be the nature of the new world which must arise from the ruins. He was:

"Standing between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born" (Walker Hugh 1964)

These fundamental convictions, that the faith which had shaped Europe was gone, and that the feudal mould of her society was shattered, are the secret of the wonderful attractive power exercised over Arnold by Senancour, the author of 'O**bermann'.** Senancour too had felt the vastness of the change, and it is the cause of that -

"Ground-tone of human agony" (Walker Hugh 1964)
which sobs through his work. Men holding such convictions must inevitably be melancholy; and Arnold the poet was habitually melancholy. In this respect his verse is unlike his prose, which has more of the charming gaiety and playfulness of his own manners. Both gaiety and the melancholy was feature of his character. J.C Shairp has touched the contrast with admirable taste in the lines which describe the youthful scholar of Balliol:

"So full of power, yet blithe and debonair,
Rallying his friends with pleasant banter gay,
Or half-a-dream chanting with jaunty air
Great words of Goethe catch of Beranger:
We see the banter sparkle in his prose,
But know not there the undertone which flows,
So calmly sad, through all his stately lay" (Walker Hugh 1964)

Looking thus upon life, Arnold naturally could not be among the optimists. He couldn't be like Macaulay, who was at ease in his Zion because of the material progress of the time. Nor could he be like Browning, who was convinced that;

"God's in his heaven,
All's right with the world" (Legouis 1934)

Arnold could find no solace among the former class, because he saw that the "something that infects the world" could be cured not by material but only by spiritual means. Neither could Arnold be among the Browningite optimists. To him it meant the assertion that the new religion had been born, without the proof. Still less could such a man feel himself in harmony with the attempts to revert to the Middle Ages. He thought the middle ages irrational. He knew that any attempt to blot or blur the record of human progress must end in failure. In '**A Summer Night'** (1853) he has drawn

imperishably, under the figure of a helmsman, the picture of him who attempts to steer his way across the ocean of life by any other chart than that of truth. The tempest strikes him,

"And between
The lightening-bursts is seen
Only a driving wreck,
And the pale master on his spar-strewn deck
And with anguished face and flying hair
Grasping the rudder hard,
Still bent to make some port he knows not where,
Still standing for some false, impossible shore" (Legouis 1934)

In Arnold's opinion, that which the time demands above all things is the discovery of some shore, towards which to steer. Men need some Columbus to guide them over a trackless ocean to new continent of which he is aware of, though they are not. The misfortune is that men can find no such captain. Goethe the "physician" of Europe's "Iron Age" had laid his finger on the seat of the disease. However, he failed to find a cure. Arnold never conceived himself to be capable of succeeding where Goethe had failed. On the contrary; he rather teaches that the problem has grown so complex that scarcely any intellect could suffice for its solution.

This feeling of almost insurmountable difficulty is the secret of Arnold's melancholy:

"It gives a sense of brooding pause, almost of paralysis of action, to his verse. It is the secret of his attraction for some minds and, of an alienation amounting almost to repulsion between him and many others. It makes him, in verse as well as in prose, critical rather than constructive. His much–condemned definition of poetry as criticism of life; is at least true of his own poetry." (Legouis 1934)

In all his deepest poems, in '**Thyrsis'** (1866) and '**The Scholar Gipsy' (1853)** in '**Resignation**' (1849), in '**A Southern Night'**, Arnold is passing judgement on the life of his age, the life of his country, the lives of individual men.

This inner gloom of the poet was reflected in his poetry up to 'New Poems' of 1867, when his mood changed and his pessimism was a little ameliorated. Poems of the earlier volume 1849, 1852, 1855, 1857 were all enveloped in gloom .The 1852 volume of his poem finds him still envying the happiness of the birds, for man's lot is to know that;

"Peace has left the upper world
And now keeps only in the grave" (Tilak 1992)

The essential greatness of his poetry may be found in what has been called "the dialogue of the mind with itself. "Its most prominent characteristic is a form of melancholy born of a painful awareness of a sensitive individual caught between a dead faith and an uneasy rationalism. Self-sufficiency has always been the classic advice of philosophy in a disorganized society;

"Live In Yourself" (Trilling Lionel 1949)

Wrote Senancour, and added;

"and seek that only which does not perish" (Trilling Lionel 1949)

Self cultivation in loneliness, in the face of the degeneracy of the world, with reference to some eternal but ill defined idea – it is a familiar burden of Matthew Arnold's communion with himself. In the midst of a jangled and uncertain world he tells himself to learn;

"That an impulse, from the distance
Of his deepest, best existence,
To the words "Hope, Light, Persistence",

Strongly stirs and truly burns" (Trilling Lionel 1949)

The genuine Arnold was an elegist of deep tenderness and solemnity; a stoic poet of high seriousness, his poetry was entirely reflective. He does not shine in constructing a story. He can express melancholy feeling with rare purity and, when he chooses, even with an emotion that is sometimes poignant. To quote Walker Hugh (1964);

"Nothing in Arnold's verse is more arresting than its elegiac element. It is not too much to say that there is no other English poet in whom the elegiac spirit so reigns as it does in him; ---he found in the elegy the outlet, of his native melancholy of the 'Virgilian cry'over the mournfulness of mortal destiny. It is the natural tone of an agnostic who is not jubilant, but regretful of the vanished faith, --- regretful of its beauty, regretful of the lost promise."

Not only are Arnold's elegiacs numerous, they are almost among his finest works. And always his spirit was that of Gray rather than of Milton or Shelly or Tennyson. The elegies are not the elegies merely of the individual. The subject of '**Rugby Chapel'** is his own father. In '**A Southern Night'** it is his brother. In '**Westminster Abbey'** and '**Thrysis**' his most intimate friends ; but even in these instances of keen personal sorrow the poet widens his view and treats human destiny, almost as much as Gray does in the '**Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'.** And precisely the same spirit inspires poems which are not elegiac in the sense of being laments for individual men. '**Thyrsis',** the poem on Clough, is scarcely more elegiac in spirit than 'The **Scholar Gypsy'**. In Both the real theme is the condition of modern life;

With its sick hurry, its divided aims,
Its heads overtaxed its palsied hearts." (V Gopalan Nair 1972)

It is so too in the '**Obermann**' poems, the **'Stanza from the Grande Chartreuse'** the **'Stanza from Carnac', 'Heine's Grave'** and **'Memorial Verses.** In all there is the same grandeur of utterance, and the same calmly sad undertone. They are the voice of a spirit almost crushed beneath the burden of life. Hence, there is a grave scolding note in Arnold's verse. He is against the materialistic spirit. There is a plea for gentleness and quite as against the bustling energy. It was this which attracted him to monastic life. Arnold denounces life. He believed that man leads his life in grief and despair without ever experiencing the glow or joy of life. In '**Scholar Gypsy'** the tragedy and pathos of man's lot in universe is pathetically presented;

"For whom each year we see
Breeds new beginnings, disappointments new;
Who hesitate and falter life away,
And loose tomorrow the ground won to-day"

The inevitable loneliness of humanity was another cause of Arnold's melancholy, and most beautifully expressed by him;

"Yes: in the sea of life enisled,
With echoing straits between us thrown
Dotting the shore less watery wild,
We mortal millions live alone."(Palgrave 1985)

The pathos of the poems on his dead pets lies in the sense of their isolation from their human keepers. The great power of nature also suffers from the same loneliness:

The solemn peaks but to the stars are known,
But to the stars, and the cold lunar beams;
Alone the sun rises, and alone
Spring the great streams" (Walker Hug 1964)

Faced with a fate which seems indifferent and even hostile to human needs, men have traditionally turned for consolation to love, either secular or religious, and nature. Wordsworthian though he claimed to be and worshipper of natural beauty, especially clear rivers, lakes and seas, Arnold had little faith in the divine beneficent powers of nature. He had Wordsworth's charm, but neither his cheerfulness nor his detachment. Arnold sometimes betrayed the influence of Byronic disenchantment. However he substituted a melancholy resignation for Byron's mode of revolt.

Arnold's conclusions regarding human nature were also not very favourable. Most men, for him, live meaningless lives in a brazen prison, and the few that escape behave with complete irresponsibility and come to wreck. The poet asks:

"Is there no life, but these alone?
Madman or slave, must man be one". (Sen Gupta 1992)

But in '**Rugby Chapel'** he is willing to admit that though most men live wasted lives and die forgotten, some strive after an ideal that is fruitful and memorable. But even these would fall by the wayside unless upheld by strong souls like his father, through whom he can at least believe that there were great and good men in the past who were servants and sons of god.
The 'vague dejection' that weighed down upon his soul was a chronic condition, he was a little too cold and much too sophisticated to enjoy a first love – affair. Arnold feels painfully helpless in "Times' current strong." In spite of Marguerite's charm, he derived no real happiness from his meetings with her. His most passionate desire was to be alone on the snowy peaks. Arnold therefore had no great faith in the efficacy of love.

The story of ambivalent love was a characteristic one of the 19th century.
Rousseau's '**Confessions**' had led the ground for the understanding of emotional ambivalence. From Pushkin to Clough, poets tell of lovers separated not by difficult circumstances but by the inability of the men to know the true tendency of his heart. If his love story was paradoxical no one was more aware of it than Arnold himself. He believed that his affair had been an emotional failure. The realization of the general inability of the human souls to meet was strongly embedded in him;

"Thou hast been, shalt be, art, alone". (Trilling Lionel 1949)

It was only once or twice that he gave love its true place and explored its significance as in the poem '**The Buried life'** which for all its melancholy has no self-sufficient pessimism. It is distressing that Arnold should have lapsed from this fundamental faith, to the extent of denying the very existence of love even in the very act of invoking it for himself.

"Ah, love let us be true
To one another; for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light. (Palgrave 1985)

But Arnold sought to do more in his poetry than to utter the turmoil of his spirit. To quote Goodman;

"Brought up in the classical tradition of English Education, he attempts in narrative poetry to reproduce something of the restrained and ordered beauty of the Greeks.
In '**Sohrab and Rustum';** we have the many reminiscences of the Homeric manner; but even here the modern romantic melancholy appears through the classical form." (Goodman 1988)

Arnold's mood had brightened and the age itself had grown less disturbing by the time he published the '**New Poems'** of 1867. The primary ground for the brighter spirit was his entering upon new and exhilarating forms of activity, with wider recognition. However Arnold could never achieve a view of life which may be called optimistic. His tendency was to suggest that the best one can hope to reach was a state of calm;

"The General life, which does not cease,
Whose secret is not joy but peace" (Tilak 1992)

The lesson he himself drew from the world was resignation. One was the somewhat ignoble resignation of the cloister, which seems to be Arnold's choice in the '**Stanza from the Grande Chartreuse'**. The other was the stoic resignation inspired by a sense of duty not helped by any hope of reward. His "rigorous teachers" forbade the surrender of intellect and enjoined the facing of all difficulties at whatever cost, and even though the end were failure. It was Browning who taught that under apparent failure there may be hidden real success, but the spirit of the teaching inspires Arnold's work. There is a touch of hope as well as of pity in ***"A Summer Night'.*** It has melancholy, but it also has a hardly stoicism.

One vital point regarding Arnold's melancholy is that it is not real because his melancholy is not the melancholy that dejects and depresses. It is not the melancholy that sucks ones strength and spirit, the melancholy that palls with pessimism and leaves one with despair, but a wistful feeling that:

"Resolve to be thyself, and know, that he
Who finds himself, loses his misery". (Trilling Lionel 1949)

What could be more profoundly melancholic than the exquisite poem **'Dover Beach'?** Yet there is nothing maudlin, nothing unmanly about it, how delicate is the pathos in the more fanciful poem '**The Forsaken merman':**

"There dwells a loved one
But cruel is she;
She left lonely for ever
The kings of the sea" (V Sachithanandan 1978)

Though the ache was always there at the heart of Arnold's poetry, there was also hope and cheerfulness. To quote Compton Reckett-

"No whining with Arnold, no luxury of grief, no sentimental pessimism. Neither is there any joy, nor any real peace. It is the serenity of a troubled but brave spirit." (Compton 1991)

Conclusion

One cannot be enthusiastic over Arnold's poetry, for the simple reason that he himself lacked enthusiasm. He was however a true reflection of a very real mood of the past century, the mood of doubt and sorrow. Though, marked by the elemental note of sadness, all Arnold's poems are distinguished by clearness, simplicity, and the restrained emotion of his classical models. Finally to sum up in the words of Legouis and Cazamian:

"The true tone of Arnold's temperament is Sadness: a pensive melancholy essentially Romantic in origin, which gains sterner tones from the more definite anxieties of the century, now more sedate and mature. Here again, as in the case of Clough, we find the uneasiness of a soul torn between meditation and strong self–possession on one hand , and on the other, the claims of action; but with Arnold there is above all the feeling of a wound, the loss of cheerful temper which Clough owed to the possession of a

satisfying faith. The vague Christianity of Arnold, the moral pantheism to which all the philosophical reflection tends, seems to have left in his inner self an emptiness a scar which is revealed only in his poetry . The loss of all positive belief came as a momentous experience to him as to many of his generation, and hopelessly destroyed all his joy of life" (Legouis and Cazamian 1981).

REFERENCES

Compton–Rickett Arthur 1991. *A History of English Literature,* Universal Book Stall, New Delhi, Pg.463, 466

Goodman W R 1988. *A History of English Literature*; Dobra House Booksellers & Publishers, New Delhi, Pg. 275

Legouis Emile 1934. *A Short History of English Literature,* Oxford University Press, Amen House, London; pg.334, 335, 342

Legouis and Cazamian 1981. *A History of English Literature,* S.G.Wasani, Macmillan India Limited, New Delhi, Pg. 1189-1190

Palgrave Francis Turner 1965. *The Golden Treasury*; Oxford University Press, London, fifth edition, pg.364, 365

Sen Gupta S P 1992. *Matthew Arnold Selected Poems;* Rama Brothers, Educational Publishers, New Delhi, Pg40

Tilak Reghukul 1992. *Matthew Arnold: Seleced Poems;* Goel M.P, Educational Publishers, Meerut; Pg 30, 33

Trilling Lionel 1949. *Matthew Arnold*, Columbia University Press, New York, Pg 118, 124, 131

V. Gopalan Nair 1972. *The Harp and the Lyre*, Orient Longman Ltd. Madras, Pg. 143,144.

V Sachithanandan 1978. *Six English Poets*; S.G.Wasani, Macmillan India Limited, Madras, Pg.446.

Walker Hugh 1964. *The Literature of the Victorian Era;* S.Chand & Co., New Delhi, Pg337, 339